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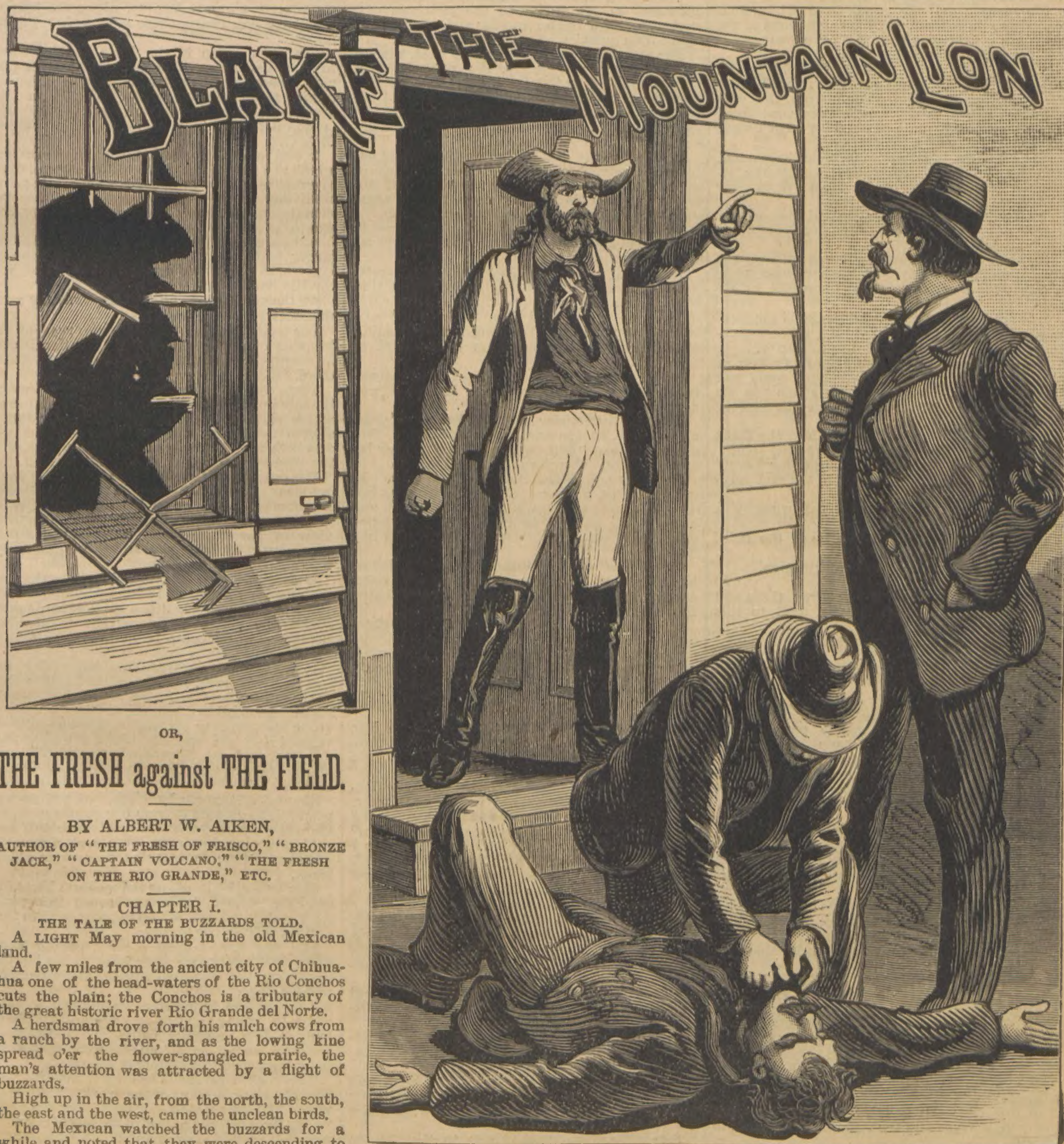
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OR,
THE FRESH against THE FIELD.

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AUTHOR OF "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "BRONZE
JACK," "CAPTAIN VOLCANO," "THE FRESH
ON THE RIO GRANDE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TALE OF THE BUZZARDS TOLD.

A LIGHT May morning in the old Mexican
land.

A few miles from the ancient city of Chihuahua one of the head-waters of the Rio Conchos cuts the plain; the Conchos is a tributary of the great historic river Rio Grande del Norte.

A herdsman drove forth his milch cows from a ranch by the river, and as the lowing kine spread o'er the flower-spangled prairie, the man's attention was attracted by a flight of buzzards.

High up in the air, from the north, the south, the east and the west, came the unclean birds.

The Mexican watched the buzzards for a while and noted that they were descending to the ground at a point some two miles to the north where the main road from Chihuahua to

"BLAKE, THE MOUNTAIN LION, DON'T INTEND TO GO OUT OF THIS TOWN UNTIL HE
IS CARRIED OUT, FEET FIRST!"

Presidio del Norte crossed the river; then to the mind of the man came the remembrance that his neighbor, who occupied the next ranch to the south, had mentioned on the previous night that one of his cows had strayed away.

"Aha! there is the cow!" the herdsman exclaimed and he set off to examine into the matter.

When he came to the ford he found the buzzards fighting over their quarry, the ugly, black birds screaming, and pecking at each other, and flapping their wings as each one strove to push the other from the banquet.

No carcass of a beast, but the body of a man, the unclean birds, the scavengers of the South, fought over.

The herdsman drove the birds away, but so tame were the filthy things, for it is against the law to harm a buzzard, that they only retired for a short distance, and circled around, eager for the human to begone that they might again fall to their prey.

That the man had met his death during the night was plain, for the herdsman had crossed the ford a little after eight o'clock on the previous evening and the body had not been there then.

From the fashion of the clothes it seemed evident that the man was a foreigner, and that he had come to his death by foul play the herdsman suspected for there were stains upon the ground where pools of blood had been.

This discovery filled the simple soul of the herdsman with fear. He shivered. To his mind there was something horrible in these silent witnesses to a bloody deed.

And, as he stood and trembled, the clatter of distant hoofs fell upon his ears.

He turned; up the road from Chihuahua came two horsemen, and the bright rays of the morning sun dawned upon the brown barrels of the guns that the riders carried.

"Now, thank the saints!" the herdsman cried. "Here come two cavaliers from the city on a shooting excursion, no doubt, and they will take this matter off my hands. Caramba! there has been a bloody piece of work here and I want to wash my hands of the matter."

The buzzards—the dark mass upon the ground, and the herdsman gaping at it, statue-like, attracted the attention of the riders from afar and they spurred on their horses.

As the herdsman had anticipated they were a couple of sportsmen from Chihuahua out for a day's shooting.

By their dress and bearing it was evident that they were men of rank, and the herdsman made a respectful obeisance as they drew rein by his side.

"Well, well, my man, what is this?" the foremost one of the riders cried in a tone of command, like one used to wielding authority.

Two better men to examine into an affair of this kind the old city of Chihuahua could not have produced, for the one who spoke was the chief of police, and his companion the leading doctor of the town.

Briefly the herdsman explained how the flight of the buzzards had attracted him to the spot.

"It looks as if there had been murder here!" the chief declared. "Have you touched anything?"

"No, senor, I but just arrived when you came up."

"Do you know where the office of the chief of police is in Chihuahua?"

The herdsman replied in the affirmative.

The chief wrote a note.

"Give this to the senor in charge there and conduct the men whom he will send to this spot; take my horse."

The sportsmen had dismounted.

Away the herdsman went.

"Now, doctor, let us see what we can make of this."

The buzzards had sadly disfigured the body, the face, in particular, being so torn that it was not possible to determine whether the man was old or young, but from the fact that the hair was light in color, and the hands slender and white, the inspectors came to the conclusion that the stranger had not been old, nor used to hard work; that he was not a Mexican was apparent.

Examination disclosed that he had been shot three times, and then the assailants, as if determined to make sure of their bloody work, had inflicted half-a-dozen knife wounds, each one sufficient to let out a life.

The pockets were turned inside out, and not a single article of value was there upon the person but there were letters and some memorandums which showed that the man's name was Jackson Blake.

"I know him!" exclaimed the chief of police as soon as this discovery was made. He was an American sport who has been in Chihuahua for about six months with a companion called Ringwood. He was very much of a gentleman, and the luckiest gambler I have ever known. He always carried a large amount of money with him, and that fact, probably, brought him to his death."

In due time the police, for whom the chief had sent, arrived and the remains were taken to the city.

The other American, Ringwood, was found and he immediately identified the body by means of the clothes as being that of his friend. The part of the hotel where the Americans lived testified also to this point, as did some half-a-dozen sporting gentlemen, all well acquainted with Blake.

That he had been decoyed from the city and murdered for his money was clear, for Ringwood gave evidence that Blake had told him on the previous evening he had an appointment with a rancher in regard to buying an extra good horse which the latter had for sale, and he, Ringwood, was to go with him to see it, but he had been called out on business, and being detained longer than he expected, found on his return to the hotel that Blake had left a message saying that he had gone to see the horse, and Ringwood further stated that Blake had four or five hundred dollars in his pocket.

When questioned in regard to the rancher, the American said he had not seen the man and knew nothing of him more than Blake had said.

It was plain a trap had been arranged, and the unsuspecting sport had been led into an ambush and killed for his money.

"Two days afterward a full account of the 'murder of Senor Blake, an American sporting gentleman, who among his associates bore the strange appellation of the Fresh of 'Frisco,' appeared in the American paper which managed to exist—it could not be said to flourish—in the old Mexican city."

For a wonder the journal devoted considerable space to the matter, winding up with the declaration that the indefatigable chief of police, "with his well-known skill and acuteness, had managed to get a clew to the padrones who committed the brutal murder and their arrest was only a question of time."

The attentive reader will notice that, though Mexico bears, and justly, the reputation of being considerably behind the age in most matters, her police are up to the old game, and are always just going to catch the criminals who defy the laws, exactly the same as the man-catchers of more advanced nations.

It is safe to say that the newspaper would not have had energy to procure so good an account of the affair if "Senor Ringwood" had not taken the trouble to wait upon the editor and give him all the particulars of the tragedy.

"Senor Blake had many acquaintances in Chihuahua and they will be anxious to learn all the sad details," he explained.

In regard to this the American was correct, as far as one person in the neighborhood of Chihuahua was concerned, and this was a beautiful dark-eyed, dark-haired Mexican woman who was a patient in the "Asylum for the Insane," a private institution located in the outskirts of the city.

Isabel Escobedo was her name and the director of the asylum, Doctor Diego Escobedo, was her cousin.

She had been under restraint for over a year, an odd case, as the doctor had explained. Not dangerous, but there was a chance of her becoming so, and therefore she was a patient.

No one would have imagined that there was anything the matter with her, for she had her own private apartment, next to the doctor's and his wife, ate at their table, and never mingled with the unfortunate creatures whose wits had flown.

The ladies were at supper when the doctor bustled in and, in a voice trembling with excitement, read the account of the murder of Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco.

"At last I can breathe freely," Isabel Escobedo exclaimed. "That man has dogged and hunted me with all the patience of a bloodhound, and if I had not shut myself up in this place, I feel sure he would have killed me!"

Then a sudden thought came to her—a thought which caused her brows to contract.

"Is it not possible that this is a trick to lure me from my refuge?" she exclaimed. "A false report so that I may be induced to go out into the world where he can strike me?"

"Oh, no, I saw the chief of police!" the doctor replied. "He is an old friend, you know, and he assured me there was no doubt about the matter; Jackson Blake was the murdered man."

"Well, I will act on that assumption, for I cannot bear to remain here longer, but I shall leave Mexico for awhile. I will go to Paris, and amid its gay scenes see if I cannot forget the past."

Isabel Escobedo left the asylum that night, but managed the matter as though she was a fugitive flying from justice, and feared that the moment she stepped foot without the walls she would be apprehended.

She was smuggled into Chihuahua, disguised in male attire, wearing the dress of a herdsman.

The doctor went in advance, and made arrangements with a brother, who lived in Chihuahua, to have horses ready.

Then, when the wagon stopped at the citizen's house, the disguised woman assisted the other herdsman to carry in the furniture with which the wagon was laden.

She passed through the house to the alley in

the rear; horses were in waiting there, and in a few minutes' time she was on the road, her city cousin acting as her escort.

If a watch had been placed upon the asylum, the quick and skillful move had set it at naught.

Isabel Escobedo arrived safely at the Mexican seaport, took ship for France, but not until she was upon the broad ocean did she breathe freely.

If an avenger was on her track, she had baffled him.

CHAPTER II.

THE MOUNTAIN CUT.

It is a wild and romantic country to the eastward of the headquarters of the Rio San Pedro, which stream, rising in the northern part of Mexico flows, with a northeasterly trend through Arizona until it falls into the Rio Gila.

The Mulepass district—taking its name from the rocky range, known as the Mulepass Mountains—is about as wild a corner as the territory of Arizona can show.

In the extreme north lies the mining-camp of Tombstone; at the time of which we write the first great strikes at Tombstone had recently been made, and that peculiarly-named town was enjoying a boom.

There was the usual rush to the new camp, and prospecting parties had gone from it in all directions, particularly to the southward, for amid the wild peaks of the Mulepass Range it was confidently expected that some rich mineral discoveries would be made.

No second Tombstone, though, was discovered, although a few small camps sprung up amid the foothills of the Mulepass Mountains, and across the boundary line in Mexico, along the base of the Sierra San Pedro, there were a few paying mines.

The chief camp in the Mule district was a town, situated on a little stream known as Chinese Creek, which, rising amid the Mulepass peaks, flowed into the Rio San Pedro; the town, boasting a population of a hundred souls or so, bore the peculiarly American name of Slide Out.

It was in a small valley, through the center of which ran the creek, here a gentle stream, murmuring musically over golden sand, and on all sides the valley was shut in by the pine clad mountain-peaks, with the exception that there was a passage to the north where the creek found its way through the hills, and another, larger and wider, at the south end of the valley, where the stream went on its way to join the Rio San Pedro.

At the upper end of the valley was the mine which had made the camp.

The trail which, leaving the main road at the junction of Chinese Creek and Rio San Pedro, followed the creek up into the valley, ended there.

There was no beyond—no road after leaving the mine was reached except an old Indian trail which led up into the mountain fastness, but so seldom used, now that the red-men had been driven away by the advent of the whites, that the wild vegetation had almost obliterated it.

The only part of the old path which still stood out clear and distinct, was that which followed the course of the creek up into the hills for about a quarter of a mile, from which point a view of the entire valley could be had, a road usually used by hunters in search of game and wood-choppers after fuel.

It is just two years to a day from the time that the body was found at the foot of the Conchos, which was identified as that of Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, that we introduce the reader to the camp of Slide Out in the Red Dragon Valley.

It is afternoon—a warm and balmy day, and in a sheltered nook, high up on the hillside, close to the old Indian trail, sat a young and beautiful girl gazing down into the valley.

She was not over sixteen, and yet so fully developed that she was a miniature woman: the daughters of the Southland, where the sun's kisses are warmer than in the chilly North, mature early.

She was a Mexican by birth, but yet no one would have guessed it from her appearance, for she was a blonde with the most beautiful red-gold hair, yet her eyes were such a peculiar dark gray blue in color as to appear almost black.

She was a little below the medium height, exquisitely formed, and was robed in a plain, dark walking-dress, which rather added to than detracted from her beauty.

She was seated upon a rock, gazing down upon the valley, an open book in her lap, but her thoughts were evidently far away from the printed page.

She was deep in the day-dreams that so often come to young, ardent and romantic maidens. Only a few moments before she had come up the trail, seated herself on the rock, opened the book, and then lost herself in thought.

The rock was shadowed by a massive, low-branched oak, a giant of the rocky wilderness, which had kept watch and ward over the lonely valley long before the feet of the intruding white men had pressed Arizonian soil.

A slight noise amid the branches of the tree attracted the attention of the girl.

With a sigh she glanced upward, and the sight she saw was one which almost congealed with horror the blood within her veins.

On one of the spreading branches of the oak, between her and the trail, was a huge animal of the cat species, known, locally, as the mountain lion.

The beast had evidently been asleep in the limb and the appearance of the girl had disturbed his slumber.

Now he was crouching on the branch, his tail waving too and fro, like an angry house cat, preparing to spring upon the girl.

The human and the beast gazed upon each other, the eyes of one dilated by fear, the other at the prospect of a meal.

The girl's limbs were paralyzed by fright. If it had been possible for her to have escaped by springing to her feet, and dashing away from the dangerous spot, she could not have done it.

She was as firmly fixed to the rock upon which she sat by the benumbing terror, as the massive oak to the soil in which it stood.

The beast was delayed in its attack by the fact that a light branch, extended between the limb on which he sat and the girl, and this evidently puzzled him.

The head of the girl began to swim as she gazed into the green eyes of the huge cat, and she felt that her senses were leaving her.

The short, quick bark of a rifle rung on the air.

The mountain lion pitched forward from the limb, turned a somersault in the air, claws and jaws working convulsively, and landed at the feet of the girl, dead!

With a gasp the maiden fell backward from the rock.

She had fainted.

When she recovered her senses she found herself lying upon the sward in a half-sitting posture, with her back against the rock upon which she had sat, and a stranger, kneeling by her side, was sprinkling her face with water which he had brought from the creek, making a basin out of the crown of his hat, hollowed in.

"There, I reckon you are all right after all," he said, cheerfully, when he saw the girl open her eyes.

"Don't be afraid! the danger is over, for the beast is dead; I happened to come along the trail just in time."

She sighed, attempted to rise, but found she had hardly strength.

The man assisted her to resume her seat upon the rock, then, seeing that she was all right, he threw the water from his hat, replaced it upon his head, picked up his rifle, which he had dropped upon the ground by the side of the mountain lion, and inserted a fresh cartridge in place of the one with which he had killed the beast.

The girl watched him with distended eyes.

He was a stranger; she knew every man in the camp, and, in fact, all the dwellers for forty miles around, but she had never seen him before.

His appearance was such that once seen he would not be apt to be easily forgotten.

He was a well-built, muscular fellow, rather above the ordinary size, with clean-cut, regular features, although as he wore a full beard and his hair came low down on his forehead, the greater part of his face was hidden.

His beard was short, and grew in little kinky curls like those so common to the Jews; it was black as jet, as was also his hair, which descended in ringlets to his shoulders, after the scout fashion, and was cropped short in front, just as if the man had played the barber with the aid of a bowie-knife. But the strangest thing about the stranger was the color of his skin, which was of a copper color, fully as dark as the average Indian's hue, and yet, with the exception of his dark complexion, there was nothing about the man to indicate that there was any Indian blood in his veins.

He was dressed in a full suit of buckskin which was much the worse for wear, plainly showing that it had seen hard service.

It was not cut after the Indian fashion, leggings and hunting-shirt, but in breeches and short coat.

He wore no vest, and a fawn-colored flannel shirt covered his well-developed chest. The shirt had a broad, rolling collar, and a black silk handkerchief was knotted around his throat in sailor fashion.

Well provided was he with weapons; the belt which girded in his supple waist supported a pair of revolvers and an ugly-looking, ten-inch bowie-knife, a superior weapon.

No wonder that the young girl, as she looked upon the man, thought that he appeared to be every inch a hero.

CHAPTER III. CATALINA.

"You have saved my life!" the girl exclaimed, as soon as she recovered the use of her tongue. "Oh, sir, how can I thank you?"

"Oh, that is all right! don't mention it," he replied, finishing the recharging of his rifle as he spoke, dropping the butt of it to the ground,

resting his arm upon the muzzle of the Winchester, and gazing with curiosity upon the girl.

Little wonder that he looked, for the excitement had given a color to her cheeks, a sparkle to her eyes, and she appeared divinely beautiful.

"Oh, but you have saved my life, sir!" she exclaimed, with clasped hands, gratitude beaming from her brilliant eyes.

"It was just accident; I happened to be coming down the trail and the growling of the beast attracted my attention. My moccasins deadened the sound of my footsteps, and so the beast had no suspicion that there was a foe in his rear. But I say, miss, is that the camp of Slide Out yonder?" and he pointed to the town in the vale below, as if eager to change the conversation.

"Yes, sir; are you going there?"

"That is my intention."

"You came down the trail?"

"Yes."

"How did you find your way across the wilderness? No one ever comes from that direction," exclaimed the girl, in wonder.

"Well, I managed to; but then, you see, miss, I am about half-Indian, I reckon. I came across from Los Mulos."

"I don't understand how you ever were able to do it, for even the old hunters, who know these mountains well, always made a *detour* to the south, and go around through the foot-hills instead of crossing the range."

"I reckon they are wise to do it, for I will admit I found the path a terribly rough one. The old Indian trails, along which I have come, are mighty uncertain paths, and I reckon if I had to make the journey again I should go around through the foot-hills too. I can tell you this, I am heartily glad to see the camp at last."

"Is it your purpose to remain there?" she questioned. She asked because, as the man seemed inclined to make light of the fact that he had saved her life, and evidently wished to avoid being thanked, the thought had come to her that if he intended to stay in the camp she might be able to be of some service to him, and so, in a measure, cancel the debt she felt she owed.

"Well, yes, I think so, for a while, at any rate," he replied, slowly. "But, as I am a bird of passage, and act on the whim of the moment, it is not safe to calculate far in advance upon what I will do."

She examined the stranger carefully with her eyes, and the expression upon her face showed that she was perplexed.

She did not know what to make of the man; he was dressed something like a hunter, and yet did not look like a mountain-man; he was evidently not a prospecting miner, who had been searching the wilderness for precious metals, for he had no tools. What manner of man was he, then?

"You must pardon my question," she said. "I asked because I thought if you intended to remain in the camp that I might be able to be of service to you, for although you seemed disposed to make light of the matter, yet it is true that you have saved me from a most horrible death, and I shall not rest satisfied until I have done something to show my gratitude."

"Oh, don't say anything more about it, I beg, miss," the stranger exclaimed, with a deprecating shake of the head. "I reckon that if you had been in my place you would have done as much for me, or for anybody else, for that matter."

"That is true, but still that does not relieve me from the weight of obligation," the girl exclaimed, with a charming smile. "If you are going to stay in the camp, I am sure I can be of service to you. My name is Catalina Blanco, and my guardian, the Marquis de Belleville, is the owner of the Red Dragon Mine; that is the large building that you see at the upper end of the valley. In fact, the marquis owns the town and all the surrounding country for five square miles."

The stranger gazed at the girl with great interest, and it was a few moments before he replied, then he said:

"I understood that the Marquis de Belleville was an extensive land-owner, and I was told at Los Mulos that it was his policy never to sell any of his land. He would give a lease to any one who wanted to build in Slide Out, but would not sell."

"That is so he can control the town and prevent undesirable people from getting a foothold there," the girl explained. "The marquis is a Frenchman, and he wishes to conduct his business here exactly the same as he would in France."

"Yes, but he must take one fact into consideration: the people with whom he has to deal in these Arizonian wilds are not the same as the humble, ignorant French peasants," the stranger remarked.

"Oh, he understands that!" the girl exclaimed quickly. "The marquis has been a great traveler—has made the grand tour of the world twice, and spent a great deal of his time in foreign countries studying the manners and customs of different people. He speaks five or six languages as fluently as he does his native tongue, and his English is so perfect that no one would ever take

him to be a foreigner, except from his personal appearance."

"Yes, I have heard that he is quite a remarkable man, and the camp here has flourished finely ever since he started in to develop this Red Dragon property."

"There was no town until he came," she explained. "All that you see has sprung up within six months."

"Something after the manner of the building of Aladdin's Palace," he suggested.

"Yes, the growth has been marvelous, and it is nearly all due to the mine, for the greater part of the men in the town work there. There are a few small claims in the neighboring gulches, but they say the owners will never get rich out of them."

"Yes, it has got to be in mining now, as in almost every other business, it takes money to make money. The individual miner does not stand much chance. But in regard to the marquis speaking English so well, allow me to say that your English is perfect; no one, hearing you speak, would ever believe that you were French."

"Oh, I am not!" the girl exclaimed, quickly. "I was born in Texas. My father was a Mexican and my mother an American. I was left an orphan at an early age, but was looked after by a distant relative of my mother, and this lady married the Marquis de Belleville, and that is how the marquis comes to be my guardian."

"Ah, yes, I see. The marquis has not been married long, I believe."

"No, only a little over seven months; just before he came here. It was through his wife that he became interested in this property."

"Yes, so I understood. His wife is a Mexican lady, I was told."

"That is true; she was on a visit to Paris and there met the marquis, and was married to him. Then they came to this country. I was taken from the convent school where I had been ever since I was a little girl, and came here with them."

"I have been in Mexico a great deal and I may have met the marquis's wife there—or rather heard of her, I ought to say—for I am not the kind of man that mixes with the upper crust," he said with a laugh.

"Her maiden name was Isabel Escobedo."

The stranger shook his head.

"I reckon I never ran across her."

"I have explained who I am, sir, that you may be able to see I am in a position to be of service to you, if you intend to remain in the camp," Catalina said in her gentle, high-bred way.

"Well, I do reckon to stay awhile in Slide Out if I like the place, but I want to say to you, miss, that about the best service you could do me is not to mention this little matter."

The girl opened her eyes wide in astonishment.

"Not mention it?" she cried.

"Yes, don't say a word to a soul about it! What is the good? It doesn't amount to anything, anyway, and it would only draw attention to me, and that is what I would avoid, if possible."

The man spoke in perfect seriousness, and the girl was utterly amazed.

"I do not understand it at all!" she exclaimed. "You have performed for me the greatest service that you could possibly render, and yet you ask me not to speak of it!"

"Yes, that is what I want," he said, frankly. "Oh, but I could not think of acting in such a way!" the girl declared. "The marquis is very good to me, and Madam de Belleville could not be kinder if she was my own mother, and when I tell them that you have saved my life, they will gladly do all they can to aid you in every way."

"Miss, I see I have got to speak very plainly to you," the stranger said. "There are reasons why your people cannot acknowledge an obligation to me, as they would to a man differently situated."

"You might as well learn the truth now, as two or three days or a week hence; as you will be sure to know it if I stay in the camp, as I expect to do," the other remarked in a quiet way.

The girl looked perplexed; she could not imagine what was coming.

There was a boulder cropping out of the earth near where the man stood, like the one upon which the girl sat, and the stranger seated himself upon it.

"As a beginning, I will say that my name is Thomas Blake, and that for the past ten years I have led a life of adventure; there is hardly a mining-camp of note in the West that I have not visited, and I can't say that any of the towns have been benefited by my presence, for, socially, I am an outcast, something akin to the wolves, a bird of prey who goes about seeking whom he may devour."

"To put it right down in plain language, I am a card-sharp—a gambler, who lives by winning money from men whose wits, or fingers, are not as nimble as my own."

"You will perceive, miss, that I am not a very reputable member of society, and that it

would be impossible for your guardian, the Marquis de Bellville, to look with favor, or to encourage by his friendship, such a man as I am."

The puzzled expression upon the girl's face deepened and she shook her head, slowly.

"Yes, I think I understand you now; you imagine that because you make your living in this way my guardian would not like it because the chance of fate put it in your power to do me a service."

"Yes, that is the point exactly," and the man smiled in his good-natured way in the face of the girl.

Her brows contracted in thought, and again she shook her pretty, shapely head, crowned with the brilliant red-gold hair—the hair of the Virgin Mother that the old masters were so fond of putting upon the canvas.

"There are some things about this matter that I do not understand," Catalina remarked, slowly. "Suppose now that the marquis could have witnessed this peril of mine—been in such a position that he could see the danger to which I was exposed, and yet not been able to help me, do you think if he could have had the power to say whether a man like yourself, should come to my rescue or not, that he would have decided it was better for the wild beast to eat me, than to allow such a man as you are to save me?"

Blake laughed outright at the question, which the girl however put in the most serious manner.

"Upon my word, Miss Catalina, I believe that during your convent life some worthy father, has taught you to argue!" he exclaimed.

"You have the best of it; there is no doubt about that. Under the circumstances the marquis undoubtedly would say, 'Rescue her, no matter what kind of a man you may be!'"

"And the act being performed, then the fact that you are, what you call a card-sharp, absolves me from the obligations of gratitude!" Catalina remarked with a charming smile, although there was a touch of sarcasm in her tone.

"Oh, no! no matter how lowly the man is—no matter what he has done, the service is still the same, and the weight of obligation remains. That is not the point! Excuse me for saying it, but you fail to see facts in the case. This is the point."

"Suppose you introduce me to the marquis and explain what I have done; he desires to be civil to me—to show his appreciation for the service. How can he do it?"

"I am a gambler; he cannot very well invite me to make his house my headquarters while I remain in the camp in the good old Western way. I cannot accept the hospitality of the Marquis de Belleville and then go out and gather in all the loose ducats I can corral at cards; that would never do at all!"

"No, I do not think it would!" the girl admitted. "But why are you obliged to lead such a life?" she continued with a bright smile, and then, proceeding with increased confidence, as though she was sure she had found a way out of the difficulty, she continued:

"There is no necessity for it I am sure! I can see from the way you converse that you are no common, ignorant man, and I am certain that, if you wish, you could easily obtain congenial employment in the Red Dragon Works. Men of education and brains are not plenty in this wild region, and I know the marquis has been obliged to send to the big city to obtain men capable of filling responsible positions. I am certain that when he learns of the service which you have performed to-day he will find something for you to do very quickly."

The face of Blake grew grave as he listened to the words of the eager child, for Catalina was but little more as yet.

"Ah, Miss Catalina, you state your case with rare logic," he remarked with a shake of the head. "I am afraid I should have to serve an apprenticeship at the law or study theology with some learned Jesuit to be able to cope with you."

"I appreciate your kindness, and the prospect that your words open for me would fill my soul with joy, were I anything but what I am. But, my dear young lady, there is an old, homely saying—an extremely true one though—which fits my case exactly; 'you cannot teach old dogs new tricks.'"

"I should never be satisfied to hold a position in a mine, I could not submit to the confinement. There are some birds, you know, Miss Catalina, that will not live in a cage—some humans that must be allowed to roam at their own sweet will, or they become of no use to themselves or anybody else."

"I hope you will not think any the worse of me if I have to decline your kind offer, and again to request that you will not mention this little matter."

"I feel sure, sir, that you are doing yourself an injustice!" the girl replied, rising, and the color in her cheeks deepening a little, for she was pained by his refusal. "I am sorry that you will not let me try to show my gratitude, but as I see you are obstinate, I shall have to be content. Will you forgive me for being a little obstinate too? I cannot keep this matter a

secret! I should have no peace if I did so; and it is not in my nature either to conceal so important an event in my life from those near and dear to me."

In her excitement she came close to him—he had also risen—and laid her dainty white fingers upon his arm.

"Oh, if you think that way, miss, of course I shall not attempt to hinder you from speaking, only don't let any sense of obligation weight upon you. I haven't any doubt that if I remain in the camp—as I surely will for some time if it is a flourishing place—that you will be able to find some way to square the account between us."

"I usually succeed in getting into hot water in almost every place I visit before I have been there long, and if I have my usual luck here, you may have a chance to put in a good word for me," he said with a smile.

The girl looked at him for a moment with a puzzled expression upon her face, and then shook her head.

"You are the strangest gentleman that I have ever met, but I am your debtor all the same. I shall see you in the camp and until then, goodbye!"

She offered her hand, and he touched the little palm with his strong, brown hand with as much respect as though it was the hand of a queen, and then she took the trail leading to the camp.

He watched the graceful figure as she descended the path; half-way down she turned, saw that he was watching her and waved a farewell to him.

Blake resumed his seat upon the rock and fell into a brown study for a moment.

"Who is this girl?" he queried, after a few minutes' reflection.

"There is a look to her face that is strangely familiar to me, and yet I have never seen this bright young beauty before."

"An orphan—father and mother both died when she was an infant and Isabel Escobedo has always provided for her. Is there a mystery then about the girl's parentage? Is it a resemblance to the face of Isabel Escobedo that I see in her? Is the blood of the accursed Escobedo race within her veins? If so, I am sorry for it. But these speculations are idle; I will on to the camp and see about quarters."

Then, slowly, he went down the trail to the valley.

CHAPTER IV.

HOWLING MIKE.

BLAKE proceeded through the town until he came to the hotel which was situated in the center of the camp.

At this hour in the afternoon the town was like a deserted village, for about all the inhabitants were absent at work.

The hotel was a medium-sized two-storied shanty, with the usual bar and restaurant on the first floor and sleeping-room above. The sign bore the inscription:

GRAND HOTEL,

ELAM PERKINS.

"That sounds like a good old Yankee name," Blake remarked, as he noted it.

And when he entered the hotel he found that the landlord was a veritable down-East Yankee; a tall, lathy man, with tow hair and a scrawny chin-beard of the same hue.

For all the world just such a man as the artists draw when they depict Uncle Sam, only not nearly so good-looking.

"How are yef glad to see you, stranger!" he exclaimed, with a strong nasal twang, as Blake entered.

"Pretty well, how are you?" and the stranger shook hands with the landlord as though he had known him all his life. "How's business?"

"The camp is booming, stranger, and if you are looking for a good place to locate, I reckon you can't do any better on top of this 'ere airth than to locate right here in Slide Out," the landlord replied.

"How may I call yer handle, stranger, and what is your biz?"

"Well, I am a speculator," Blake replied.

"A speculator, hey—in what?"

"Pasteboards and ivory."

The landlord looked astonished.

"Sakes alive! stranger, I calculate you won't do any business up in this 'ere region with sich truck as them. We hain't got no use for pasteboards and ivory, nobow!"

"I see you have failed to catch my meaning," Blake answered, with a smile. "Playing cards and dice are what I mean, and I profess to be a first-class juggler with either."

"Oho, you are a sport!"

"That is my lay-out."

"Wa-al, I reckon you have struck a good stamping-ground," the landlord declared. "Our boys here are death on keards, and the camp from 'bout eight to twelve at night is as lively a town as a man would keer to be in. It is dull enough in the daytime, but the men are all at work then."

"Oh, yes, I understand. This is not the first

mining-camp that I have struck by a long shot."

The Yankee carefully examined the stranger from head to foot, and then exclaimed:

"Wa-al, now, I shouldn't wonder if you are a sport from 'wayback!"

"Oh, yes, I am jest as keen as they make 'em. You are safe to bet your ducats on that, and you will win every time!"

"I shouldn't be surprised. Wa-al, stranger, if you can handle the keards you kin make big money here. What did you say your name was?"

"Blake—Thomas Blake."

"Mr. Blake, it does me proud to welcome you to Slide Out!"

And the landlord again shook hands with the new-comer, but just then he happened to glance out of the door, and a shade of annoyance appeared on his face.

"Consarn it!" he cried, "if there ain't that Howling Mike!"

The peculiar appellation at once attracted Blake's attention.

"Well, that is a lively kind of a name!" he exclaimed.

"You bet, stranger, and he is a lively kind of a cuss, particularly when he has got a little rum on board as he has now, I should judge. The durned brute! He walks right into a man's place, calls for what licker he likes, and never shows the color of his money!"

"Do you stand any such nonsense as that?" Blake asked, in astonishment.

"What in thunder air you going to do?" the landlord demanded, deprecatingly. "Don't you understand? The feller is a reg'lar terror when he gits a few glasses of rum into him—why, he has killed more men than he has fingers and toes!"

"Oh, yes, I have seen such fellows before," Blake responded, dryly. "But, landlord, if I was running a shebang of this kind, and a big ruffian of this stamp should attempt to try any such game on me, do you know what I would do?"

"Sakes alive—no!"

"Well, I would take him by the back of the neck and boot him into the street, and I reckon after he had been well-kicked once he would not be apt to try the game on again in that place!"

The landlord cast a glance full of astonishment at Blake.

"Stranger, you don't know Howling Mike, or you wouldn't talk in no such fool way as that!" Perkins declared.

"Consarn his pictur'! he's making a bee-line for here as I was afeard!" he continued. "You had better set down, stranger, and take up a newspaper, so that he won't be apt to notice you, for when he gets in one of those tantrums he is apt to be ugly, and pick up a row if he meets a stranger."

"Is that so?" Blake asked with an appearance of deep interest, and during the landlord's speech he had been inspecting the man of whom the landlord stood in such dread.

"Yes, durn the cuss! I'm out a dollar's worth of licker, sure! But sit down, stranger, if you don't want to get inter trouble."

"Of course, you know the man better than I do," and after the remark, Blake went to the further end of the room, sat down, and took up a newspaper.

He had hardly got comfortably adjusted in his chair when in through the door came a big, overgrown Irishman, dressed in the usual rough miner's costume, and pretty well under the influence of liquor.

"Set out yer whisky, bad 'cess to yez, ye murderin' ould thafe of a landlord!" the fellow cried as he advanced to the bar.

"Set out yer p'isen till I fill meself up full to de t'rote wid it, do ye mind!"

Then his glance fell upon the stranger and the moment he perceived him he shook his big head exactly as a bull does when it catches sight of a red flag.

"Wow, wow!" he exclaimed, placing his hands against his sides with the elbows akimbo, "bedad! there's a stranger to the fore! Waltz up to the bar, yer b'aste in buckskin, an' take a drink with a real ould Irish gentleman, er I'll be afther breakin' yer back!"

Blake laid aside his paper, advanced to the end of the bar, some six feet from where the man stood, and then exclaimed.

"Do you think I would level myself enough to drink with you, you drunken scoundrel? Don't you give him any liquor, landlord, unless you get your money in advance, for if you do, this ugly rascal will beat you out of it, sure!"

The big fellow gazed in amazement—he had never been thus rudely addressed in his life, and as for Perkins the landlord, he immediately jumped to the conclusion that the card-sharp had suddenly become crazy, for by no other process of reasoning could he account for the stranger's action after the warning he had received.

Anxious to avoid trouble he cried:

"Oh, that is all right. Mister O' Toole here is welcome to the best in the house!"

"Aha! do yez hear that, me Jack-a-dandy!"

the big fellow cried, recovering the use of his tongue at last. "It's a rascal I am, is it? an' a scoundrel too, be the powers! I'll be afther b'atin' yez black an' blue for that. It's as plain as the nose on yer face that yez don't know who I am, or yez wouldn't dare to be afther givin' a gentleman like me any back talk!"

"Oh, I know you!" Blake exclaimed in contempt. "I have met many of your brothers in my time. You are as big a scoundrel as ever escaped a white jail!"

"It is a lie, ye villain, I have no brothers. I'm the last of the O'Tooles!" the big fellow howled, beginning to prance up and down and work his big arms in the air. "I'm Howling Mike! the best man of me inches in Arizona, bar none! An' it's blood I'm afther, do ye mind! Down on yer marrowbones, an' ax me pardon or I'll be afther murtherin' you entirely!"

"You big, overgrown jackass!" Blake cried in contempt. "Do you think you can frighten me with your howlings? Don't you give him any whisky, landlord, unless he ponies up his money, and if I were you I'd kick him into the street, the unmitigated beat!"

"Oh, he is crazy—crazy!" the landlord muttered in despair, and then he tried to mollify the angry Irishman who was so exasperated by this bold defiance, that he was dancing up and down like the fabled turkey on the hot griddle. "Unmitigated" struck him as being the most insulting "cuss"-word he had ever heard.

"He's a stranger, Mister O'Toole, and he don't know what he is doing!" Perkins exclaimed. "If he knew you, as I do, he wouldn't talk so. Take a drink now and fix the matter up!"

"No, sor, I will not dbrink wid the blag-guard!" O'Toole yelled.

"Drink with you, you dirty bog-trotter!" and Blake shook his clinched fist in the Irishman's face.

This insult was too much for Howling Mike to bear, so, with a yell of rage, he rushed upon Blake with the idea of crushing him to the floor.

The sharp danced back, as the Irishman rushed at him, as light upon his feet as any ballroom belle, and then, all of a sudden, as the big fellow paused for a moment to get his breath, out shot the iron-like fist of Blake and, landing square between the eyes of the Irishman, felled him as if he had been shot.

For a moment he was stunned, and upon recovering proceeded to stumble to his feet, feeling for his revolver as he did so, but the card-sharp was ready for him, and the moment he saw the hand of Howling Mike move toward his weapon, with wonderful quickness, Blake had both of his revolvers out, and he opened fire—they were self-cockers—upon the Irishman.

"Crack, crack, crack, crack!"

Shot followed shot in rapid succession.

Perkins dodged down behind the counter in mortal terror.

Howling Mike gave ground, so bewildered by this sudden attack that he completely lost his head, and knew not what he was doing.

He came bang against the window and tumbled through it, carrying the sash with him, and as he was cut by the broken glass, he imagined he was mortally wounded, but he managed to struggle to his feet, and yelling; "I'm kilt, I'm kilt, take him off, take him off!" rushed in blind terror straight into the creek, where he certainly would have been drowned, if some of the townsmen, attracted by his cries, had not come to his rescue.

As it was, he swallowed so much water and came so near to giving up the ghost that it was over an hour before he was anything like himself again.

Horried by the sound of the breaking glass Perkins had managed to summon courage enough to peep out from behind the bar and so had witnessed the retreat of the discomfited bully.

"My sakes alive! it is a wonder you didn't kill him!" the landlord exclaimed.

Blake leaned on the counter, laughing, evidently enjoying the scene.

"I only shot over his head to frighten the fellow," he declared.

CHAPTER V.

THE LANDLORD EXPLAINS.

NATURALLY, as soon as Howling Mike was fished out of the creek there was a rush of citizens—the few that there were about—to the hotel, anxious to learn who it was that had cut Howling Mike's comb in this scientific manner, for that Mike had got into a fight in the saloon and been thrown through the window by his antagonist all believed, and, to do the Irishman justice, it was the first time he had ever been whipped since he struck the town.

They found Perkins, ruefully contemplating the damage which had been done to his window, and Blake leaning on the bar, lighting a cigar.

The citizens gaped around; there wasn't anybody else in the place, but could it be possible that Howling Mike had been so badly whipped by this quiet-looking, unpretending stranger?

"Say, what's up—what was the trouble?" they inquired.

"Oh, it was Howling Mike, full of rum, and

on the war-path as usual!" the landlord replied with a doleful shake of the head—the thought of the damage which had been done to his window was in his mind, and glass was terribly high.

"He went to climb this gentleman, you know, and he wouldn't have it, nohow, so he jest laid him out with the nicest lick I ever saw struck and then chased him through the window with his pistols."

"Mike is bleeding jest as if he had been filled full of holes!" one of the citizens exclaimed.

"I could have killed the big idiot a half-a-dozen times if I had wanted to do so," Blake remarked, "but I fired over his head. The blood comes from being cut by the glass when he tumbled through the window."

"And who is going to pay for that air glass?" the landlord exclaimed. "That is jest what I would like to know!"

"Why, Howling Mike, of course, Blake responded. "He is the one that raised the row, and therefore he ought to pay the damages. You just make out the bill and send it in to him, and if he grumbles at all about paying it, just you tell him that if he don't I will have to attend to the matter."

Both Perkins and the rest stared. What kind of a man was this quiet-looking fellow in buckskin, anyway?

The landlord went behind the bar to reckon how much he was out on the window, Blake sauntered over to his former seat and picked up the paper which he had been reading, the citizens stared at him for awhile, exchanged a few remarks, decidedly complimentary in their nature in regard to the man who had made such a show of Howling Mike, and then departed to spread the news around town that a boss fighter had struck the camp of Slide Out.

After Perkins had figured out the amount of damage to which he was entitled, he came from behind the bar and took a seat, facing Blake.

"Stranger, I calculate you are some on the fight!" he exclaimed.

"Well, I don't know," the card-sharp replied, leisurely blowing out a cloud of smoke. "I suppose I generally manage to hold my own though."

"A man in my line of business must be ready to encounter hard knocks sometimes, and the better he is at that sort of thing, the better he will come out, of course."

"Mister Blake, I wouldn't let you hit me as you hit Howling Mike for a hundred dollars!" the landlord declared. "And I am a Yankee too, you know, and as fond of the cash as they make 'em."

"Well, I did let him have one pretty good one," Blake responded in a reflective way. "It was my game to knock all the fight out of him at one lick, and I succeeded too. That one smash took all ideas of a fist-fight out of him, and he went to pull his gun, but I didn't give him any chance to use it."

"Say, Mister Blake, you will excuse me but there wasn't any real reason for you getting into this trouble—you could have avoided this fight, if you had wanted to—if you had taken a drink with him and hadn't sassed him, there wouldn't have been any row."

"Yes, I know that, but, my friend, I hated to stand by and see you imposed on, and so I thought I would chip into the game and show this big bully that he could not run things as completely as he imagined."

"Yes, I see—now don't be riled—but don't you think it was what the boys calls kinder fresh in you to sail in and tackle this big fellow, when you might just as well kept out?"

"Fresh, eh?" and Blake indulged in a hearty laugh, much to the amazement of the landlord, who did not see anything to laugh at. "Well, maybe you are right; maybe I was a little fresh, but I reckon I am built that way."

"I calculate you are!" exclaimed the landlord with a grin.

"Wa-al, I swow, I'm much obliged! I calculate this 'ere thing will put a stop to Howling Mike sponging on me—at any rate while you are in the tow."

"It is my intention to make quite a stay, if there are any ducats 'round for a man of my size."

The landlord appeared to be buried in reflection for a short time, then he roused himself, and, leaning forward, placed his right hand upon the arm of Blake's chair.

"Mister Blake, you have done me a good turn and I calculate I ought to do you one, if I kin," he said in an extremely confidential way.

The card-sharp understood that something was coming, so he nodded and replied:

"Well, I shall feel indebted, of course, for anything you may do for me in the way of advice, or otherwise."

The landlord cast a cautious glance around, so as to be sure there were no listeners near, then he said in a low tone:

"I'm going to post yer and I take it that you ain't the man to give me away."

"You may rely on that!"

"Wa-al, stranger, you have struck the oddest camp that there is in all the wide West!"

"Is that so? In what respects?"

"Why, all the country 'round about here

for four or five square miles is owned by one man!"

"Yes, I know that—the Marquis de Belleville, the owner of the Red Dragon Mine."

"Yes, he is the owner onto the Red Dragon property now, but when you come right down to it, he hain't got any more real claim to the mine than I have."

"You astonish me!"

"Don't you give this away, you know, 'cos it would make trouble for me, but for all his power, you know, the Frenchman can't prevent people from talking."

"Very true, for this is a free country."

"You bet! Wa-al, Mister Blake, the man who ought to hold the Red Dragon Mine is now a-working in my kitchen; he's a Chinaman, Hop Hi Gee!"

"Ah, yes, I see where the Red Dragon comes from."

"Yes; from Hop Hi Gee! He is the man that discovered the mine, and he drew a big dragon with some red chalk, like stone, on a large rock, just at the mouth of the mine to keep the evil spirits away, you know."

"Yes, that is a Chinese custom."

"The mine is one of those old ones which folks say were worked by the Spaniards long before there were any folks from the East in this part of the country—'way back, 'bout the time when our Pilgrim Fathers were running things along the Atlantic coast."

"I see; then the mine was abandoned, due, probably, to the Apaches, and other Indians, making it so lively for the miners that they couldn't work, and this Chinaman rediscovered it."

"That is it; you've got it down fine. Wa-al, the marquis got wind somehow that the Chinaman had struck a good thing, so he 'jumped' the claim; took it right away from the heathen without giving a red cent."

"If it had been a white man it would probably have cost the marquis his life," the sharp remarked, grimly.

"Yes, but Chinamen don't count, you know."

"That is so."

"Wa-al, after jumping the claim the Frenchman managed to get hold of an old Spanish grant which covered the ground for four miles or so around the lead. He bought it for a song, they say, the party who held it not knowing there had been any mineral discoveries made in the district."

"It seems to me that this Marquis de Belleville might be termed a pretty sharp rascal."

"Oh, he is as sharp as a steel-trap, but you don't want to say anything against him openly, you know, for he owns this bull town, every building and stick of timber in the valley."

"I thought he gave leases and the parties put up their own buildings."

"Nary time! he does everything! and there isn't a soul in the town who can't be made to get up and git at the end of a month if the marquis takes it into his head that he don't want the party to stay any longer."

"Kinder of a little tin god on wheels!" the sharp remarked, sarcastically.

"Now to come to the pint where it interests you."

"Yes, that is what I want!"

"When you talked about trying the town, I gave you some taffy about its being a fine place for you and all that."

"Oh, it was taffy then?"

"Yes, for just as soon as the marquis finds out what your little game is he won't allow you to locate here, nohow."

"Oh, the deuce he will not?" and there was a glint of fire in Blake's clear eyes immediately.

"Oh, no!"

"And why not?" Blake questioned. "Are his miners such saints on earth that they don't indulge in a little poker once in a while, or try the scientific game of faro?"

"Oh, Lor' bless you! there is plenty of gambling going on every night after the miners get through work; the marquis himself takes a hand very often and they do say he plays a stiff game."

"He is just the man I want to meet!" the card sharp exclaimed with decided enthusiasm. "If I can get him to sit down to poker with me, and he has the nerve to stick to it, I will go bail that before we get through I will own the Red Dragon Mine, the camp of Slide Out, and the four square miles of territory!"

Perkins looked at his guest in amazement, and had it not been for the display of his quality which he had witnessed in the encounter with Howling Mike he would have set him down as being the biggest gas-bag that had ever struck the camp.

"I reckon you will have trouble in roping the marquis into any game with you," the landlord remarked.

"What makes you think so? You say he plays!"

"Oh, yes, but he don't want any traveling gamblers in the town."

"Ah, I see, he believes in protection to home industry! Well, it is good, sound sense when applied to a country, but I doubt whether it ought to be applied to gambling though."

"There is only one place in town where there

is any playing going on—that is, I mean a public game."

"I understand."

"That is the State of Texas Saloon, kept by an old sport from Galveston, Major Pete Houston. There is a faro and keno game running there, and a couple of back rooms for shut-card parties."

"Quite a metropolitan establishment and I have no doubt it is a credit to the camp," Blake remarked with an approving air.

"Wa-al, I never play keards nohow, so all I know about it is what I hear the boys say," the landlord explained. "The marquis understands in course, that the miners wouldn't be satisfied if they couldn't gamble a little, so he allows this saloon to run, and the boys can play poker among themselves all they like. I've got a room up-stairs where a party meets almost every night, but he is dead set ag'in' any traveling card-sharps coming to the town, and has run three or four out already."

"Oh, he has run them out, has he—this Frenchman?" and again the gleam of fire shone in Blake's eyes.

"Yes, he has a reg'lar police force in the camp, a chief and six pretty bad men; this Howling Mike is one of them, and that is the reason why people don't make a kick 'bout his foolishness; they know that the marquis is 'back of the Irishman and they calculate he will see Howling Mike through if he gits into any trouble."

"Why this is the dark ages over again!" Blake exclaimed. "You don't really mean to say that this Frenchman dares to run free American citizens out of the camp because their mode of life doesn't happen to suit his royal highness?"

"That is so, and don't you forget it!"

"Oh, I will not. Of course, I can understand that if this was a strictly moral town and no gambling was permitted, then, if a traveling card-sharp happened to strike it, it would only be natural for the boss of the town to say to him, quietly, that his room was more desired than his company; I have been situated several times myself, so that a committee has waited upon me and expressed the opinion that the air of the place did not agree with me, and that my health would be better if I concluded to go somewhere else—"

"The Vigilantes, I calculate you mean!" the landlord exclaimed with a grin.

"Yes, I believe they were called by some such name," the sport replied with an innocent smile. "Well, sir, in no one case did I ever attempt to argue the point. I was too much of a gentleman to stay in a town after the inhabitants got the notion into their heads that I had better quit. I am an American from 'wayback, and I believe the majority ought to rule. But the idea that, in a camp like this, with an open, public gambling saloon, running in full blast, that a quiet, well-behaved card-sharp cannot be allowed to locate is monstrous!"

"It is a fact, all the same!" the landlord declared. "And you will find it out too after you have been a week or so in the camp; mebbe in two or three days; just as soon as you settle down to business, and it is plain that you are a gambler, the chief of police, Bill Bristol—or Bristol Bill, as everybody calls him—will wait onto you and suggest that you had better git yer traps together and light out."

"That is the way it is done, hey?"

"Yes."

"And has every man gone—obeyed the command, and slunk out of the town like a whipped dog?" Blake exclaimed, a bitter ring to his voice.

"All but a couple, who came here together, and when they were warned out, said they calculated that this 'ere was a free country, and they meant to stay in the camp until they got good and ready to go."

"Aha! those fellows were lads of mettle!" the sport exclaimed.

"Yes, they used them to start the graveyard with up on the hill," the landlord observed, dryly. "Mebbe you noticed it as you came down the trail? It is on the right hand side, just before you get to the Red Dragon works."

"And so they killed the men and planted them, eh?"

"Yas, that is jest what they did," Perkins replied. "What kind of a show did they stand, two ag'in' seven, and the thing was worked so that it looked as if it was a fight that sprung up on the spur of the moment."

"The sports stopped with me and they were in front of the bar drinking one night; the saloon was tolerably full of people. I noticed that the chief and all his crowd were on hand; I suspected that there might be trouble, and there was, sure enuff!"

"One of the police jostled ag'in' the sports, then there was a little bit of sass, and the sports, seeing that they were in a hole reached for their guns, but the gang had their knives ready, and they were cut afore they could get their weapons out. Everybody run when the fuss commenced, 'cept the men that were into it, so nobody could say for sart'in who did the job."

"But I shouldn't think the men of the town would relish such an iron rule as this," Blake observed.

"Wa-al, there are a few of 'em who growl a

leettle once in a while, jest as if they felt like kicking, but, you must remember that 'most all the men in the camp are depending upon the marquis for their bread and butter, and he never interferes with nobody but grumblers and desperadoes; so men who make their living by hard work are not going to risk their lives for strangers."

"I suppose the marquis is afraid that if any sports get a foothold in the town they may seek to undermine his power, for, as a rule, the card-sharps of the West are men who are not inclined to stand much nonsense."

"Yas, I calculate that is it. Now that I have posted you 'bout this 'ere thing you must be keeful not to git me into any fuss," the landlord remarked.

"Oh, that is all right. I will be cautious not to betray you."

"I kinder felt as if I ought to give you a hint, for you interfered to help me, and—excuse me for saying it, you know—but you are sich a kind of a fresh cuss, I was afeard you would git into a scrape, right off, if I didn't give ye a hint as to the lay of the land."

"Much obliged! I shall know how to carry sail now, and as gamblers are not allowed to stay in Slide Out, and I have made up my mind to remain in the camp for awhile, I will have to do something desperate."

"Something desperate?" the landlord queried in wonder.

"Yes, I shall have to go to work," replied Blake, laughing at his jest. "So, if you hear of anybody who wants a good man, be sure to let me know."

"Oh, I will."

A customer coming in called the landlord away, and he went to the bar, decidedly impressed with the conviction that the stranger sport was as odd a man as the camp of Slide Out had ever held.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GIRL'S STORY.

By far the largest house in the camp, twice the size, almost, of the hotel, was the residence of the Marquis de Belleville.

It was the next house to the Red Dragon works, and only a couple of hundred feet from the mine.

It was a two-storied building, square in the center, with projecting wings, and was tolerably well-furnished.

It must be remembered that furniture and all such business come dear in a mining-camp situated so far from the central lines of travel as Slide Out.

In the right wing of the house, the one nearest to the mine, the business offices of the marquis were situated; he was the alcalde of the town, an official borrowed from the Spaniards, who, in his one person, answers for both mayor and judge. The rest of the building was devoted to household purposes.

In the main room of the house, a large square apartment on the first floor, the principal members of the marquis's household were assembled, when Catalina Blanco came in flushed with her adventure.

The marquis was extended upon a sofa, smoking; he was an inveterate smoker, seldom being seen without a cigar in his mouth.

In person, the Marquis Maurice de Belleville was a man of forty, or thereabouts, with regular, strongly-marked features; his hair was jet-black and curled in little crispy ringlets all over his head; he wore a full beard, which was short and carefully trimmed so that there was a well-defined parting in the middle at the chin; his eyes were as black as his hair, restless, peculiar eyes, seldom quiet. Altogether there was a strong Jewish cast to his face, and one skilled in reading nationalities in faces would surely have decided that the Marquis de Belleville had a great deal of Hebrew blood in his veins.

Probably, though, no greater insult could be offered to the man than to suggest such a thing.

By his side, in an easy chair, sat his wife, a brilliant, dark-haired, dark-eyed woman, who would have been called beautiful if it were not for the strong masculine expression that there was to her face.

To the reader of the stories entitled, "The Fresh on the Rio Grande," "The Fresh in Texas," and "The Fresh in New York," the lady requires no introduction, for she was the Isabel Escobedo who played so prominent a part in those tales.

By the table, in the center of the apartment, sat Doctor Diego Escobedo; this gentleman, the reader will remember, was the proprietor of the insane asylum where Isabel was for a time an inmate. He was deep now in a late Mexican newspaper.

The fourth person in the room was a well-built, rather handsome young fellow, whose face betrayed that he was of foreign parentage.

This was Francisco Gomes, a nephew of the Cuban husband whom Isabel Escobedo had married in the "ever-faithful isle."

Young Gomes had been educated at one of the American colleges, a School of Mines, expressly for mining business, and was superintendent of the Red Dragon works.

The party were engaged in general conversation when Catalina came dashing into the apartment, her cheeks all in a glow with excitement.

"Well, well, Miss Fly-away, what is the matter with you?" Isabel asked.

"Oh, madame, I have had such an adventure!" the girl exclaimed.

"An adventure?" Isabel questioned.

"Something remarkable, eh?" the marquis asked. "I should judge so from your looks."

The doctor put down his paper and the young man looked up from the figures which he was running over in his memorandum-book.

"Yes, indeed, madame, just listen!"

And the girl seating herself by the side of the lady, related what had befallen her on the mountain-side.

All listened with intense interest, the narrative interrupted now and then by exclamations of amazement from the hearers.

Catalina possessed the story-teller's power, and gave a full, vivid and interesting description of all that had occurred.

"You had a most miraculous escape!" Isabel declared when the tale was told.

"If you remember, Catalina, I have cautioned you that there might be danger if you strayed too far from the valley," the marquis remarked.

The doctor shook his head and looked wise, while Francisco Gomes gazed at the beautiful young girl in a wistful way, just as if he envied the stranger the joy of saving her.

"But who would anticipate danger from wild beasts so near the town?" Catalina asked.

"These mountain lions are very bold sometimes. I have heard of them coming right into a settlement in search of prey," the marquis remarked.

"So, this stranger is a card-sharp," he continued, "and made no concealment of the fact?"

"Not at all; and he advanced the fact of his lending such a life as a reason why I could not be of any service to him in return for saving my life."

"The fellow is sensible enough there, and understands that a man like myself could not possibly encourage a fellow who gambles for a living," the marquis remarked. "I am very glad that he came in time to save you from the cat, but am sorry that the incident happened, for it places me, in a measure, under obligation to the man, and it complicates matters a little."

"Why, how is that—I do not understand?" the girl asked, her beautiful eyes dilating in astonishment.

"Well, my dear child, of course you are not aware of the fact, but gamblers are not allowed to remain in the camp," the marquis explained.

"As soon as I find out that a man is a professional gambler, I warn him that he must depart, and if he is not inclined to go, I call upon the police, and he is forcibly ejected from the valley, with the warning that if he ever returns it will cost him his life."

"Oh, isn't that dreadful!" Catalina exclaimed.

All gazed at her in astonishment, and the marquis sat bolt upright on the sofa.

"Dreadful, Catalina! What do you mean?" he demanded, sharply.

"Why, that you will have to send away this gentleman who saved my life!" the girl explained.

It was clear that all her thoughts about gamblers were centered in one man.

"Oh, yes, I see. Yes, it is rather rough on the fellow, and that is what I meant when I said that the incident complicates matters," the marquis remarked. "But I will talk nicely to the man; I will take pains to see him myself, for your sake. I will make him a handsome present, and then send him on his way rejoicing."

Catalina shook her head, and there was a cloud on her fair young brow.

"I am afraid, sir, that you will not be able to get this gentleman to take anything," she said. "He is not a common kind of man at all, but very superior in his manners and speech."

The marquis looked at the frank and outspoken girl for a moment, a peculiar expression in his eyes, which plainly denoted that he did not like the way in which she spoke.

"I am afraid, Catalina, that this incident has cast a glamour over you, and your judgment is not to be depended upon," he observed, dryly. "Some of these traveling gamblers have a sort of polish which might deceive an inexperienced girl, like yourself, into believing that the fellow had some of the instincts of a gentleman, but when the truth comes out, you will discover that the man is nothing but a low, common, vulgar rascal."

"Oh, I feel sure after you see him you will not say that!" the girl declared. "Of course, I am no such judge as you are, but if ever I met a perfect gentleman it is this Mr. Blake!"

"Blake!" cried Isabel in a kind of shrill scream, and she sprung to her feet, her face as white as the collar that encircled her neck; then she staggered back, attempted to grasp the top of the chair to keep from falling and if the mar-

quis had not sprung to her assistance most surely would have sunk to the floor.

He helped her to the chair again, the doctor brought a glass of water, but the faintness lasted but for a moment.

"I am all right now," she said, slowly. "A sudden spasm seized upon me just as I pronounced the gentleman's name," she continued, becoming like herself again. "Do not worry, Maurice, it is nothing!" she declared to her husband.

"Mr. Blake did you say was the gentleman's name?"

"Yes, madame," Catalina replied.

She was only a simple girl, not versed in the artifices and tricks of the world, but she was not deceived by Madame de Belleville's extremely shallow evasion. She understood that it was the hearing of the name which had caused her agitation.

"I knew a Mr. Blake in Mexico, and he led rather a wild life. Do you think it can be possible that this can be the same man, Maurice?" she asked, appealing to her husband, who had returned to his seat upon the sofa.

"Oh, I don't know; it is not improbable," he replied.

"Did he tell you his first name?" she asked, turning to Catalina.

"Yes, madame, it was Thomas."

"I don't think that was the name," Isabel remarked, putting on an appearance of deep thought, as though she was trying to recall the past.

"Oh, you cannot tell much by names," Doctor Escobedo observed. "Gamblers, and men of loose habits, are birds of passage and have a new name for every new town."

"If I remember rightly, this Mr. Blake, to whom I refer, was a man about the size of the marquis, perhaps not quite so tall, or as stoutly built. He had dark-blue eyes, very white skin—always very pale so that his face had the appearance of the face of a man who had just recovered from a long illness, and he had peculiar yellow hair, which curled all over his head in little tiny ringlets, just as the marquis's hair does."

"Oh, no, madame, he doesn't answer that description at all!" Catalina exclaimed. And there was a feeling of gladness in her heart that her Mr. Blake was not the one to whom Isabel referred.

She could not have explained why it was there—the reasons—but she was glad, nevertheless.

"He has jet-black hair which comes clear to his shoulders, wears a full beard, black also, has dark eyes—they may be dark-blue, I am not certain, and his complexion is a real copper-color, fully as dusky as any Indian I ever saw."

A long breath came from Isabel's lips, and Catalina, noting it with her keen eyes, understood that a weight had been taken from the mind of her protector.

It was all very mysterious; what did it mean?

"Well, I will have to see the fellow and get rid of him as nicely as possible," the marquis observed, with a yawn, as though he feared the task was going to be considerable of a bore.

"I thought, perhaps, that you might find a place for him in the mine," the girl explained, "but he said he did not think such a life would agree with him."

"These genuine sports rarely are contented to settle down," the marquis observed. "But, as I know the class well, I understand how to handle such men, and I will fix the matter with him so he will depart perfectly contented. I will attend to it immediately."

The marquis took his hat and departed; his wife followed him into the entry.

"A word before you go, Maurice," she said, and she drew him into the apartment on the other side of the hall.

The house was arranged in the southern style, with a broad hallway running through the center of it.

"Shut the door, Maurice," she said, after the marquis was fairly in the room, and she sunk into a chair as she spoke.

"What is the matter, Isabel?" he inquired. "You seem nervous—completely unstrung, in fact," he remarked, helping himself to a chair.

"I am. A presentiment of danger fills my soul," she cried, hoarsely.

"And all because a man by the name of Blake has happened to strike the town?" he exclaimed, evidently annoyed by her weakness.

"Yes, I know that it seems to be foolish, but I cannot help it," she replied. "I do not understand this sudden fear which has seized upon me—I do not understand myself at all. I did not believe that there was any terror in this world that could daunt my soul. I always have among my acquaintances the name of the man—woman, and Manuel, my brother, who was as brave and daring a fellow as ever lived, a hundred times has declared that I was as much a man as he!"

"And yet, at the simple uttering of a name, you go all to pieces like a weak, hysterical girl!" the marquis observed, a slight touch of contempt in his tone.

"Yes; of course I fear the man who bears the name of Blake—Jackson Blake, the Fresh of

'Frisco, as he was called. For years there was a bitter war between us; he triumphed, killed my brother, Manuel, and secured the rich prize of the millions of Escobedo, for which Manuel and myself had schemed and toiled. Then he went to the East to enjoy his fortune.

"By the grave of Manuel, murdered by this man, I knelt and swore that I would not know either rest or peace until I had avenged his death.

"I unsexed myself and followed him to the East, and there I dealt him blows which cut him to the very heart. Writings with pain, he turned upon me. My work was done, and I fled! He followed on my track like a very sleuth-hound. It is a mystery how he managed the matter, but he tracked me to my refuge—a mad-house in the old Mexican city of Chihuahua.

"You would imagine that when he found I was in such a place, hopelessly insane, for so it was given out, and believed by everybody, for I had suffered enough to drive any one mad—that he would have been content to give up the pursuit; that he would have said to himself: 'Since the woman is mad, it is plain that fate has avenged me!'"

"But he was shrewd enough to suspect the truth," the marquis observed. "He did not believe you were crazy, but that you had sought refuge in the mad-house so as to be safe from his pursuit."

"No doubt. The man has always had the instincts of a sleuth-hound!" Isabel exclaimed.

"When I found that he remained in Chihuahua—that apparently he had made up his mind to stay until I either died in the asylum or came forth so that he could strike me, I became desperate.

"I employed bravos and attempted to assassinate him, but he was always on his guard and every attempt failed; and then the truth came to me that if I kept up the unequal fight much longer, I should really go mad.

"Flight alone was left me; by a cunning trick I succeeded in escaping to France; there I met you and became your wife, and I firmly believed I never should cross the ocean to the New World again."

"Well, I was like you, I believed my future was secure, but fortune dealt us ugly knocks, played some nasty tricks, and we were forced to cross the water to this land, where it is much easier to carve out a future than in Europe."

"You know I came unwillingly, and I would not have come at all if it could have been avoided," she remarked.

"Yes, but there was no other move for us, and it had to be made, and, so far, we have prospered amazingly," the husband remarked.

"You did not tell me the particulars in regard to this man Blake before. You merely said that there was such a man—he was a card-sharp, your enemy, and you feared him. And, if you remember, we both agreed when we contemplated coming to this valley, that there was little danger of his finding you here."

"Yes, that is true," she admitted.

"Then I took precautions to keep out traveling gamblers, and made it so warm for them that I am informed that it is well known in all the neighboring camps that it is not healthy for card-sharps to venture to take up a residence in Slide Out."

"And yet this man has come," Isabel murmured.

"A stranger to the region, evidently, whose wandering footsteps happened to lead him into this camp," the marquis replied. "But, I say, Isabel, you seem to have lost your wits in regard to this matter. Your alarm seems to me to be most unreasonable. Here you have jumped right to the conclusion that this stranger is the man you fear, because his name is Blake, and yet, according to Catalina's description, he does not at all resemble the Blake that you know."

"He is a shrewd and cunning man, and it would be an easy matter for him to disguise himself."

"In that case, then, he would hardly stick to the name of Blake, knowing that it would excite suspicion, when there are a hundred other appellations which would answer him as well."

"True, there is reason in that, but may it not be a cunning trick to throw me off my guard? He reasons that I would not suspect he would come here in disguise and yet keep his own name."

"Upon my word, Isabel, your imagination is extremely fertile!" the marquis exclaimed, with a laugh. "Such reasoning as that would never have occurred to me."

"Oh, I know I am weak and silly to yield to this blind terror!" the woman exclaimed, a trace of anger in both face and voice. "But all the time I was in the mad-house, hiding from my foe, I brooded upon the matter until I became nearly crazy. I am sure that if I had staid there six months longer I would have been a raving lunatic."

"I should not be surprised at such an event occurring under the circumstances."

"It is the hidden, unknown danger which strikes dread to the heart," she exclaimed. "Let me once be sure that the Fresh of 'Frisco is

again in the lists, ready to fight me to the death, and you will quickly see that I will not tremble, nor shrink from the contest!"

"That is the right way to treat the matter," the marquis observed. "Suppose this man is the Blake you dread—and to my thinking the odds are a thousand to one that it is not—what on earth could he accomplish against us? On the first signs of war I would crush him, as I would a worm beneath my feet."

"You do not know this Blake of whom I stand in dread!" Isabel exclaimed. "The man is absolutely fearless and seems to bear a charmed life."

"Let him come into this valley and I will soon convince you that his good angels are not as potent as mine!" the marquis exclaimed with a touch of annoyance. "But I must be off. Don't worry, Isabel; whether this man is your Blake or another I will soon get rid of him!"

And then he departed.

CHAPTER VII.

BRISTOL BILL.

JUST without the house the marquis encountered his chief of police, William Bristol, or Bristol Bill, as he was generally termed.

The chief was a rough-looking, muscular fellow, with a bull neck, and a bullet-like head and a face which strongly resembled the countenance of a bull-dog.

He was a typical English rough, and no one who was any judge of nativities would ever have made the mistake of thinking him to be the son of any other nation.

Armed to the teeth was the chief, and he swaggered along with an air which plainly told that he considered himself to be a man of vast importance.

"Marquis, you are jest the man I want to see!" he exclaimed as he encountered the great gun of the town.

"Well, what is it?"

"I want the doctor."

"Who for?"

"Howling Mike."

"What is the matter with him?"

"He got in a fight down at the hotel and was laid out in the worst kind of way."

The marquis looked incredulous.

"Oh, it is a sure enough fact!" the chief declared.

"How many were at him?"

"One man only."

"A single man lay out Howling Mike?"

"That is so! I knew you would be astonished. I was struck all in a heap when I heard of it, and I rushed off to ask Mike about it; there was only one man, he declared; some fellow that he asked to drink, and the man not only wouldn't drink but sassed Mike, called him a scoundrel and all sorts of names, and when Mike went for him, he gave Mike an awful welt over the nose, and Mike has got two of the worst black eyes you ever saw; then Mike reached for his gun, but the man was too quick for him, and Mike swears he was filled full of holes, then the fellow wound up the picnic by pitching Mike head-first through a window, glass and all, and Mike is badly cut with the glass, but I couldn't find any bullet-wounds, although Mike declares he was hit a dozen times."

"Was Mike so drunk that he couldn't take care of himself?" the marquis demanded.

"No, he wasn't; I saw him ten minutes before the fight came off, and though he had been drinking, yet he did not have enough bug-juice on board to hurt him any."

"This stranger must be a hummer," the marquis remarked. "Did you find out who he is?"

"No, I didn't learn his name, but from the description I should think he was a kinder cross between a sport and a mountain-man; he's dressed in buckskin, with long black hair down to his shoulders jest like a gal."

"By Jove! it must be this man, Blake!" the marquis exclaimed.

"Oh, you have heard of him then?"

"Yes," and then the marquis briefly related what he knew of the man.

"Well, boss, all I have got to say is that if he is a sport, and is inclined to be ugly, we will have trouble with him!" the chief declared.

"I will summon the doctor, and see Mike myself."

Doctor Escobedo was called, and the three proceeded to the Police Headquarters, which was located in a good-sized shanty, near the mouth of the mine.

Little satisfaction could the party get out of Howling Mike though, and the marquis was strongly of the opinion that when he had got into the row he was so much under the influence of liquor as not to be capable of comprehending what happened.

Mike declared the stranger had produced the awful bruise on his face with a single blow of the fist, but the doctor pooh-poohed the idea.

The doctor was a Mexican, knew nothing of the "manly art of self-defense," and had little idea of the tremendous force with which a skilled and carefully-trained prize-fighter can strike.

"The man was drunk—he was hit with a club!" the doctor declared to the marquis.

What impressed the three with the belief that

Mike had been terribly under the influence of liquor at the time of the affray was the fact that he insisted he had been wounded by the stranger's bullets, which he declared clattered around his head like hailstones in a storm of sleet: a dozen shots, at least, he asserted, had been fired at him, and the shooter within a yard.

But not the slightest sign of a bullet wound did he bear, although some of the gashes produced by the broken glass were ugly enough.

After instructing Doctor Escobedo to do all he could to make the man comfortable, the marquis took his way to the hotel.

"I begin to feel quite a curiosity to see this fellow," he muttered as he proceeded down the street.

"Upon my word he has managed to make himself quite prominent in an extremely short space of time!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE INTERVIEW.

WHEN he entered the hotel saloon he found the landlord to be the sole occupant, and the moment the marquis made his appearance, Perkins immediately jumped to the conclusion that he had come to inquire about the fight, so he was all prepared to answer when the inquiry was made.

The landlord described the affair in all its details; explained how he had tried to make peace, and assured the master of Slide Out that it was through no fault of his the trouble had occurred.

"Of course, I know that, Perkins," the marquis replied. "It seems to me then that though Mike was to blame for insisting upon the stranger drinking with him, yet if the man had not been so forward—so fresh, to use the American slang, the trouble would not have occurred."

"Yas, I reckon the critter is rather fresh," the landlord admitted.

Then to the mind of the marquis came the queer nick-name that the Jackson Blake, of whom his wife was so afraid, possessed; the Fresh of Frisco.

Clearly this man, if he was not the original, had as good a right to the first part of the name as the man who was.

"According to what I hear he is not a large man," the marquis remarked.

"Wa-al, I calculate he ain't no giant, but he is built from the ground upwards, and if you had seen him hit Howling Mike between the eyes, you would have been mighty apt to think he had a small steam engine back into his shoulders."

"It was with his fist then and not with a club that he struck Mike?"

"Oh, Lor', yas! he didn't use no club, and when he got his guns out he fired over Mike's head. He could have either killed, or laid the man on his back with a wound which would have kept him there for a month of Sundays, but he didn't want to do it."

"As he said, after the fight, all he wanted was to show Mike that he wasn't near as big a chief as he thought he was."

"I think I will have to interview this gentleman," the marquis observed. "Where is he now?"

"Gone up-stairs to his room."

"I will go up and have a talk with him."

"Number ten is his room."

"Thanks!"

The marquis proceeded up-stairs and when he arrived at the door which bore the figure ten upon it, he knocked—he was bid to enter and did so.

The room was a small one—little bigger, in fact, than a good-sized closet, only about six by eight feet, and all the furniture it contained was a cot-bed and a single stool. A blanket was provided for bed-clothing, and each guest had to furnish his pillow as best he could.

Blake was sitting by the window on the head of the bed, looking out upon the rocky peaks which hemmed in the valley.

Blake rose as the marquis made his way into the room, his appearance—he was neatly dressed in a rough tweed suit, but wearing the broad-brimmed felt hat so common to the wild West—at once conveyed to the sport that this was the man who ruled the town.

"Mr. Blake, I believe?" the marquis said.

"That is my name, sir."

"Allow me to introduce myself; I am the Marquis de Belleville."

"Happy to make your acquaintance, sir," the sport responded with a polite bow, but as the other made no move to tender his hand, after the general fashion, Blake did not.

"I should like to have the pleasure of a few moments' conversation with you."

"Certainly, glad to be able to oblige you; help yourself to a seat," and Blake pointed to the stool at the foot of the bed while he resumed his former position; by this maneuver he placed his visitor so that the light from the window fell on his face, while his own was in the shade, his back being to the light.

"My ward, Miss Blanco, has informed me in regard to the service which you were able to render her to-day."

"Yes?" Blake quoth with a smiling nod.

"And both the lady and myself are very desirous of showing our appreciation of the service in some way."

"It is not necessary, I assure you," Blake responded. "The young lady thanked me in the most grateful and graceful manner, and that I consider settled the thing for good and all."

"The girl was right," was the marquis's thought. "The fellow does know how to talk, and is evidently a man of education."

"But, my dear sir," said De Belleville aloud, "neither the lady, nor I, are satisfied to allow the matter to end in this way. Miss Blanco informed me that when she explained who she was and the fact that I am the great landholder of the district, you replied that there was no service we could render you."

"That is the truth; as I said, the lady's thanks are enough. I risked nothing—put myself to no trouble, and any man with a gun in his hand would be glad to encounter so noble a game as a full-grown mountain lion, and that reminds me that I did not secure the skin. I don't understand how I came to neglect it, but I will attend to it."

"Give yourself no concern, I beg. I will send and have it preserved for you."

"Thanks, I shall be much obliged."

"Excuse the question—but are you well-heeled, in a money sense, I mean?"

"Well, I have got enough to get along with, I reckon," Blake replied with a smile.

"I do not wish to offend, but would you accept of a small sum, a hundred dollars, say, as a memento of this little event?" The marquis spoke in that peculiar tone of voice which is often adopted when a disagreeable proposition has to be made, and the proposer wishes to soften it as much as possible.

There was a glint of fire in Blake's clear eyes as the marquis drew out a large roll of bills.

"No, I don't think I care to take the hundred, but I will tell you what I will do. I will go you a quarter, odd or even, to see whether I take that roll of bills or you keep it," Blake said this in the most matter-of-fact way possible.

"Eh?" exclaimed the marquis in amazement, gazing first at the roll and then at Blake as though he was in doubt in regard to the sport's meaning.

"I say I will go you odd or even for the roll," Blake explained with that strange coolness so characteristic of him. "I win, I take it; you win, you keep it!"

"Well, really, I think this is the most extraordinary proposal that I ever heard!" the marquis exclaimed, utterly amazed. "Do you know, sir, that there are about a thousand dollars in this roll?"

"Oh, I had just as lief go you for a thousand as for a hundred. The bigger the stake the greater the fun to my thinking," Blake replied.

"Yes; but I say, it seems to me that this is a most uneven proposal that you have made. What do you put up against my roll?"

"Cheek!" answered Blake, with a calm face.

"Yes, I should say so!" exclaimed the other, drawing a long breath. "Well, I don't think we can gamble!"

"I reckon you are wise in not risking it; the odds are big that I would skin you!"

"Well, all I have to say is that the coolness of that proposal of yours is enough to take a man's breath away!" the marquis exclaimed.

"Do you think that it is any cooler than your proposal to give me a hundred dollars for saving your ward's life?"

"I do not see how you can compare the two," the other replied, coldly.

"And just see, too, what a low figure you are putting on her," Blake remarked. "Now, in the old slavery days any likely negro wench would easily fetch from a thousand to twelve hundred dollars, and yet you only value the life of a young, beautiful, well-educated white girl at a hundred."

The marquis drew himself up; the words made him wince.

"Sir, I do not presume you intend that your language shall give offense, but it certainly does! By offering you a hundred dollars, I do not mean to set that value, or any other, upon the life of my niece. From your costume I should judge that you sometimes go in pursuit of game, and I should think any hunter would consider himself well paid if he could get a hundred dollars by a single shot."

"Well, I do hunt sometimes," the sport remarked, the peculiar glint of fire shining in his eyes, "and when I go on the trail it is always after big game."

The marquis was a man of keen perceptions; he had led a life of adventure too, which would be certain to sharpen the wits of the dullest man, and he fancied that there was a hidden menace in the speech.

Was this man the Blake then of whom his wife stood in such dread?

But he dismissed the thought almost as soon as it came to him.

"She has infected me with nervousness!" was the comment in his mind.

"I perceive you are offended by my offer so we will say no more about it," the marquis remarked, returning the roll of bills to his pocket.

"Now then, Mr. Blake, I have rather an unpleasant duty to perform—unpleasant at all times, and particularly so in your case, after the service you have rendered my ward," he continued, again adopting the smooth, oily tone.

"Well, I am sorry for you."

"I presume you are not aware of the rules which exist in this camp of Slide Out in regard to gentlemen like yourself?"

"I reckon you will have to enlighten me," Blake said, quietly and with a perfectly innocent face.

"Well, it is against our rules to allow any sporting gentlemen—gamblers, card-sharps—to abide with us. As soon as we discover that a man has come into our camp who depends upon cards for a living we give him a quiet warning that his presence in our midst is not desired, and that he must go home."

"Suppose he is inclined to be obstinate and refuses to accept your warning?"

"Then we put him in such a condition that the affairs of this busy, bustling world will trouble him no more," the marquis replied in cold, measured tones.

"Ah, yes, I see!" and Blake rubbed his hands, gleefully, together as if he had made a discovery which pleased him. "Your touch is cold and clammy; when you reach for a man his goose is cooked—he is a gone coon—the old gag, re-recorded!"

The marquis frowned.

Was this the innocence of stupidity, or was the stranger making game of his warning?

Mr. Blake, I assure you, sir, that this is a serious matter!" he declared, sternly. "No gambler can live in Slide Out, if I know it! My will is law in this town and I have an ample force at my back to carry out my desires, and if any man comes into this camp with the idea of bidding defiance to my authority, the quicker he picks out his burial-place the better, for he will soon need six feet of earth where-in to lie!"

"Say! it suddenly occurs to me that you are uttering these remarks for my benefit!" exclaimed Blake, assuming an innocent air of astonishment.

"Certainly—for who else?"

"But what has this regulation got to do with me?"

"Are you not a gambler—a card-sharp?"

"When did you ever see me handle the pasteboards?"

"Oh, I have no knowledge of you—you are a stranger to me; but did you not tell my ward that you were a gambler?"

"Can't a man get off a fairy story once in a while if he feels like it?" Blake demanded in an extremely provoking way. "There is no law against that in this peculiar camp of yours, is there?"

The marquis felt that the other had the best of it; a plump denial was the last thing he expected.

"Then you are not a gambler?"

"Wait until you see me play, before you decide that I am!" was Blake's retort. "But I say—did I understand you to remark that no gambling was allowed in this camp?"

"No, I said no traveling gamblers were allowed to remain."

"But I saw a keno and a faro lay-out in one of the saloons in the town to-day."

"The men who run that game are residents, and so their game is permitted."

"But how about the men who play in that saloon—who buck the game?"

"Oh, that is all right, of course; miners must have some amusement."

"No law against that?"

"No."

"Oh, I reckon I will stay in your camp for awhile then," Blake remarked, with a patronizing air. "I will bet a hundred ducats to a cent that I can have all the fun I want without breaking your anti-gambling law."

The marquis was nettled; he saw that the keen-witted sharp had found a loop-hole through which he could creep and defy the law.

"Let me tell you, sir, that game will not work!" the Frenchman exclaimed, rising in a passion.

"You cannot evade our law in that way! If you remain in the town, without any visible occupation, and amuse yourself by playing at either of these two games, you are a gambler, pure and simple, and must depart, or take the consequences!"

"Oh, but I shall have an occupation. I have dabbled in mining in my time, and can do it again," Blake replied, calmly. "And, who knows, I may strike a big lead up in these mountains somewhere, which will make your Red Dragon Mine look sick!"

"Oh, no, you will not have any mine!" the marquis replied, coldly. "You may not be aware that I own every foot of land for four square miles, and I do not wish to sell an inch of it."

"That does not matter to me; I don't want to buy," the sport replied. "It may be possible that you don't know the mining laws of this country, being a foreigner. If I strike a new lead anywhere in your territory, I can hold it until the lode peters out, whether you like it or

not, and all you can do is to take your royalty, as fixed by law."

"By the eternal powers!" cried the Frenchman, fiercely, completely losing all control over himself at being thus baffled and defied, "if you dare to open a claim on my land, I will have it jumped before it is twenty-four hours old!"

"And if you do I will kill you before you are twenty-four hours older!" and Blake rose from his seat, and pointed his finger, as though it were a pistol, at the marquis.

The Frenchman was white with anger. Never since he had come into the valley had he been thus defied.

"You are digging your grave, and I will see that you are tumbled into it!" he cried, hoarse with passion.

"Bah! threatened men live long!" the sport retorted. "You are only wasting your breath trying to scare me. As I heard a fellow say once in a Fourth of July speech, 'I know my rights, and knowing, dare maintain!'"

"You drive on with your mule-team, but I warn you right at the beginning that you will make a bad break if you trouble me. I have not come to your camp with the intention of breaking any of your laws.

"You don't want gamblers here!—well and good! I am no gambler! I will find an occupation and stick to it as steadily as any man in the town! I will watch how the other men risk their money and I will do just the same as they do. One thing is certain though; I am here, and I mean to stay!"

"We will see about that!" the marquis declared, and he quitted the room in a rage.

"I told the little girl that I reckoned I would get into a scrape before I had been long in the town, and behold! Am I not a prophet indeed?" and the sport laughed, merrily.

CHAPTER IX.

SETTING THE MACHINERY IN MOTION.

THE Marquis was so overcome with rage at being thus boldly defied by this beggarly gambler, as he bitterly defined him in his mind, that he stumbled in going down-stairs and nearly fell headlong from the top to the bottom.

The landlord hearing the noise, hurried to the door. His impression was that the marquis had tried the stranger's prowess and was being taught a lesson *à la* Howling Mike.

When he opened the door though he saw that the boss of Slide Out was alone.

"Your stairs are so infernally steep that I pretty near came down headlong!" the marquis exclaimed.

A single look at his face, pale with anger, and the contracted brow, convinced Perkins that marquis's interview with the strange sport had been a stormy one.

"Has this stranger paid you for his room?"

"Yes, sir."

"For how long?"

"A week, sir."

"Give him back his money and tell him that you cannot accommodate him. And if he asks the reason tell him that you have been warned that you will get in trouble if you do."

"Yes, sir, all right, sir. I am sart'in, sir, that I am awful sorry that there has been any trouble but of course I couldn't tell."

"Oh, no, that is all right; you are not to blame," the marquis replied, his ruffled brows beginning to smooth a little. "But, remember, in the future his money is not good for anything in your house."

"All right, sir, I will pay strict attention to it; but I say, s'pose he asks me where he kin go?"

"Tell him that it is doubtful if he can find any one to take him in after the warning has been sent out, but if he is greatly in need of shelter he had best seek it with the Gray Cats of San Pedro, who, no doubt will be glad to receive him as a comrade."

And then the marquis departed.

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed the landlord, "there must have been the biggest kind of a row! Durn my pictur' of I ever seed a man git into hot water quicker than this Mister Blake has. Not an hour in the camp and given his walking ticket! But, from what I have seen of the durned fresh cuss, I shouldn't be surprised if he makes trouble before he takes it."

By the time that the marquis had gone half the distance which intervened between the hotel and his residence, his anger cooled considerably.

"I am a fool to allow this rascal to excite me in this manner!" he exclaimed.

"What is he, after all? One of those reckless idiots who has not sense enough to keep out of danger. In a spirit of bravado he has dared to defy me, but when my men get after him, I think he will change his tone."

"He is not the man, though, that my wife thinks; he is entirely different from the description she gave."

Just as he came to his house, Bristol Bill and the doctor made their appearance from the police-shanty.

The marquis waited for them.

"How is Mike?" he inquired.

"He is all right, and will be out in a day or

two," the doctor announced. "Some of the cuts made by the glass are rather ugly ones, but none of them are at all serious."

"I have just been down to the hotel and had a talk with this stranger."

"Wot do you make of him, boss?" Bristol Bill asked.

"He is likely to cause trouble, and we must run him out of the town as soon as possible."

"Aba! he is going to be ugly!" the chief cried.

"Yes; he will not depart until we force him to go," the marquis replied. "The affair places me in a disagreeable position, too. The scoundrel saved the life of Miss Blanco, refuses to accept any reward, and now I am obliged to run him out of the town. Catalina will never forgive me when she learns the particulars of the affair."

It was a strange fact that the marquis, cold, determined, and, as a rule, utterly unscrupulous in regard to how he accomplished his purpose, so long as a desired end was reached, had a wish to retain the good opinion of his young and innocent ward, and in this matter was much more troubled by the thought that she would feel hurt at his act in banishing from the camp the man who had saved her life, than by any reflection as to the justice of the deed.

"Say, boss, I reckon I kin fix this hyer thing all up straight," Bristol Bill exclaimed.

"Yes?" the marquis inquired.

"You bet! I have just been a reckoning over this hyer skirmish in which Howling Mike got laid out, and it is my idee that Mike was so drunk when he tackled the stranger that he was not able to handle himself."

"Don't you remember that I suggested that?" questioned the marquis.

"Yes, and I reckoned he was not, 'cos when I saw him, 'bout ten minutes 'fore the fuss, he was all right, though he had considerable benzine on board; but I have been thinking that, mebbe, it was fifteen or twenty minutes before the skirmish that I saw him, and that would have given him time to h'ist in a half a dozen more drinks," the chief explained.

"Exactly, and those drinks, on top of what he had taken, would put him in such a condition that a man much inferior to himself could have handled him!" De Belleville exclaimed.

"Yes; I reckon that was the how of it."

"This man is a good-sized, muscular fellow, but not anywhere near as big as either Mike or yourself," the marquis asserted.

And this was where the boss of Slide Out made a mistake.

Like the most of his race, the Frenchman knew little of the pugilist's art, and he was not competent to judge of a man's "form."

Blake, being so well-built, so accurately proportioned, did not appear to be as big as he really was, when in his street clothes, but when stripped to the waist, in readiness for a contest, he looked to be a different man entirely.

Both the Irishman and the chief of police, at a casual glance, would have been taken to be far larger men than Blake, but, in reality, there was not much difference between the three. The townsmen were some twenty or thirty pounds heavier, perhaps, but this was mere useless, clumsy bone and fat, both of which were detrimental, not advantageous.

"It has jest made me mad all through—this hyer business!" Bristol Bill exclaimed. "The idea of Howling Mike being made sich a holy show of by this light-waisted stranger! I tell you what it is, boss, something has got to be done, or we'll have some of the boys of the camp gitting the idee into their noddles that they kin get away with the police galoots, and then thar will be blazes to pay!"

"True enough," the marquis remarked.

"No doubt about it!" the doctor exclaimed. "Mike was considered to be one of the best men on the force, and when it is learned that he has been whipped in the most ridiculously easy manner by this stranger, it will surely lead the men of the camp to believe the police are not as much to be feared as they have hitherto thought."

"That is jest the p'ini!" the chief declared. "It is a black-eye for the hull gang and I propose to make a break to wipe it out."

"How?" the marquis questioned.

"I am jest going down to the hotel to lick this sport out of his boots!" Bristol Bill declared.

"The idea is a good one!" the marquis observed.

"You bet! I'll hammer him so he will be glad to get out of the camp!"

"Yes, and when he encounters you he will find that he has a different foe to cope with than the drunken Irishman," De Belleville exclaimed.

"You better believe he will!" Bristol Bill assented. "He threw Howling Mike out of the window, you know; well, thar's another window, the other side of the door; jest you come down, wait outside, and, at the close of the fandango, if I don't pitch him head-foremost through that ar' window, jest like he did Mike, then my name ain't Bristol Bill!"

"All right! we will go with you so as to witness the performance!" the marquis exclaimed.

Then the three proceeded toward the hotel.

CHAPTER X.

MORE TROUBLE.

AFTER the marquis's departure Blake resumed his seat by the window, and from the position saw the Marquis de Belleville pass up the street.

The window was in the side of the house, but as there was a wide, open space, a view of the main street of the town—in truth, the only street in the place—could be had.

He noticed the vigorous strides of the boss of Slide Out, the white face and compressed brows, and easily comprehended that the Marquis de Belleville was furious.

"His noble nibs is not in as good a temper as before this little interview took place!" Blake exclaimed with a laugh.

"It was, apparently, something of a novelty to this Frenchman to have a man talk back and sass him in the town which he thinks he rules as absolutely as though he were one of those Eastern kings, whose favorite amusement is slicing the heads from off the bodies of their attendants."

"How strange it is that men will submit to being imposed upon by a polished rascal of this kind, just for the sake of a little bread and butter! Then, too, of course, his police force overawe the town; but if there are any men in the camp, with sand enough to stand up to the rack when I show them the example, the days of the reign of the Marquis de Belleville in Slide Out are renumbered."

"Now, then, I must prepare for war, for I may expect an attack at any time."

The sport examined his revolvers, paying particular attention to the cartridges.

"I have known a defective cartridge to cost a man his life," he murmured. "And as I shall have to face big odds, in all probability, for it is not likely that I will get anything like a fair show, it will not do to have any miss-fires."

The sport had a pair of seven-shooters, double-acting weapons, beautiful tools, belted to his waist, and his bowie-knife was a superior one.

In addition to these weapons, whose presence might be suspected, when the broad belt around his waist was noticed, in each pocket of his coat he carried a small revolver, also self-cockers, and in the corner of each pocket was a hole through which the barrel of the revolvers were thrust; that is, the lower part of the pocket was a holster for the express accommodation of the pistols.

Thanks to this device, the sport could keep his hands in his pocket, apparently far removed from his weapons, and yet, in reality, each hand grasped one, ready to be discharged at a moment's warning.

Given a man, thus armed and equipped, it would be an almost impossible thing for the most agile foe to get "the drop" on him, for while the other was reaching for a weapon, he could open fire.

And, in addition to these four revolvers, the sport carried a derringer in his bosom, so arranged as to be within easy reach of his hand; a small pistol, yet carrying an ounce ball, one calculated to stop even the headlong rush of a mad bull.

It will be seen that, although on a casual inspection the sport would not seem to be a very dangerous fellow, yet he was fairly bristling with arms.

"How soon will this little affair begin, I wonder?" he mused, as he rose and commenced to pace up and down the narrow confines of the room.

"Probably to-night; the game will be to wait for the time when I will be in some well-filled saloon, then a quarrel will be picked with me, and the gang will go in to settle my hash!"

"Thanks to the landlord's cautions I am on my guard, and if they succeed in taking me by surprise the fellows will be a durned sight smarter than I think they are!"

"It would not be a bad idea to go down and have another talk with the landlord; he seems to be a decent sort of fellow, and I may pick up some points; then I will go out and take a walk around the camp, so as to see what the place looks like."

Acting upon these ideas Blake descended to the saloon.

Perkins was sitting behind the bar, reading a newspaper; he laid it down, and heaved a sigh when the sport made his appearance.

"Hello! what is the matter, old man, got the muligrubs?" Blake asked in his jovial way.

"Oh, no, I'm all right, but it makes me feel kinder sorry when I see a good man like you imposed upon."

"You will not have any occasion to be sorry, as far as that goes, for I do not intend to be imposed upon," the sport replied.

"Oh, you are a good man, Mister Blake, but it is no use; they have got it in for you, and they reckon to run you out of the town."

"I know that well enough; the marquis and I had some pretty plain talk up-stairs, and I reckon I understand the situation as well as any one; and you can bet your bottom dollar that I am not going; I am going to stay right here in Slide Out, and I am not going to slide out; there's a contradiction for you!"

"I reckon, Mister Blake, that you are 'bout as keen as they make 'em, but there are too many

for you," the landlord remarked, with a doleful shake of the head.

"I suppose I will have to fight the whole gang, but then, as the old saying is, the more the merrier!"

"I calculate that don't fit into a speculation of this kind," Perkins responded with another melancholy shake of the head.

"Say!" he continued, "I calculate you had a pesky time with the marquis."

"Yes, it was rather lively."

"I expect you sassed him right up to the nines, for he was as mad as a hornet when he came down stairs. You won't mind my telling you, that, by a long chalk, you are the freshest rooster that ever struck this town! Consarn my pictur! you ain't been in the camp much over an hour, yet you've whaled blazes outen one of the best men in the town, cheeked the boss, and kicked up more merry Satan than a common, ordinary galoot would do in a week!"

"Well, I think I have made a pretty good record in an extremely short time," Blake rejoined. "And the joke of the thing is that I did not come into this town with the idea of making any trouble. Nothing was further from my thoughts."

"Wa-al, you needn't have sassed Howling Mike—you could have kept out of that fuss, if you had choosed to let the thing go," the landlord observed in a dubious way.

"Yes, if I had chosen to let that dirty scoundrel order me around as if I had been a dog!" Blake declared, indignantly. "But I am not the kind of man to stand anything of that sort; and in regard to 'sassing' him, or the marquis, it has always been my rule, when I see that a quarrel cannot be avoided, to put in the best licks I can, right at the beginning!"

"Wa-al, mebbe you are right, but you have brought a reg'lar hornets' nest about your ears."

"Perhaps before the affair is settled some of the hornets will lose their stings, and then will wish they had not troubled a peaceable stranger," Blake rejoined, significantly.

"Peaceable! Lord sakes! stranger, you are jest as quick to quarrel as any man I ever see'd!" the landlord declared.

"Yes, when I see that there is an attempt to impose upon me, then, sir, as a rule, I go for my man, red-hot!"

"You bet!" cried the landlord, emphatically. "I calculate Howling Mike can bear witness to that!"

Then there was a pause; Perkins counted out seven dollars on the counter and pushed them over to the sport.

"What's this?" asked Blake.

"The money you paid me for your room, you know, seven days, seven dollars!"

"Yes but why are you giving it back to me?" said the sport amazed.

"Because I have been warned not to keep you."

"Oh, you have!" and the steely glitter shone in the sport's eyes.

"Yes, the marquis has told me that I must give you back your money, and let on that I couldn't accommodate you."

"He has commenced the war in downright earnest then?"

"Yes, but I warned you, you know, how things were run in this camp. If you calculated to stay here you ought not to have sassed the boss."

"I reckon I will do more than 'sass' him before I get through with his royal highness!" Blake exclaimed.

"Say! you must not blame me, you know, 'cos I cannot help myself. I have to do what he says, or he'd run me out of the town."

"Oh, that is all right," Blake replied with his airy way. "I presume the marquis imagines that I will take the money and depart, thinking I can get accommodations elsewhere, and when I try, I will find that every door is closed against me."

"I didn't say that, you know!" the landlord protested, eagerly.

"No, but that is a fact, and you know it!" the sport retorted. "I may be a new-comer here but I am up to the fellow's tricks already, and this little game is not going to work as well as he expected."

"You have rented me a room for a week, taken my money, and it is now too late to back out of the bargain; I intend to keep the room, and if you haven't got any law here to sustain me in my rights, I have a pair of good revolvers and I will try to look out for myself."

Perkins gazed at the sport for a moment in utter astonishment.

"Wa-al, all I have got to say is that you take the cake!" he exclaimed, after a moment's pause. "Then you won't go, hey?"

"Nary go! I am going to stay right with you until my week is up!"

"The boss will be awfully mad!" the landlord declared.

"I haven't the least doubt of it, but, I assure you, Mr. Perkins, it is a matter of perfect indifference to me whether he is or not. He has chosen to pick a quarrel with me and he must not expect to have everything his own way."

"I tell you, Mister Blake, you have taken a

pesky big contract on your hands when you undertake to fight a man like the Marquis de Belleville right in his own town."

"And I tell you, Mr. Perkins, that the Marquis de Belleville has taken a pesky big contract on his hands when he undertakes to run a man like myself out of a town when I have made up my mind to stay in it!"

"Say, honest, sport, if I hadn't seen you clean out Howling Mike, I would set you down as being the biggest blowhard that I ever struck!" the landlord exclaimed.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Blake, amused at the frank confession, "you would think me a boaster if I hadn't given Howling Mike a taste of my quality?"

"Sart'in!"

"Well, I don't know that I could blame you for coming to such a decision," Blake remarked, thoughtfully. "As a rule, the men who talk the loudest about what they can do, are generally the fellows who are not to the front when there is a chance for them to make their boasts good. But, if you will take the trouble to look into this matter, you will see that I have merely protested that I cannot be made to do certain things, not that I would do them."

"That is so, but you have got sich a kinder durned fresh way of talking that you give a man the idee that you say a heap more than you do."

Again Blake laughed.

"Oh, by the by, I forget!" exclaimed Perkins, as a sudden thought came to him. "You were reckoning that the boss's warning would close every door ag'in' you, but he mentioned one place to which he said I might direct you."

"Oh, did he? Well, now, that was rather kind. What did he say?"

"He told me to tell you, if you axed where you could go, that he calculated the Gray Cats of San Pedro would take you in."

"The Gray Cats of San Pedro, eh?" exclaimed the sport, immediately impressed by the singularity of the name.

"Yes, that is what he said."

"And who may be the Gray Cats of San Pedro?"

"You know there is a range of mountains just across the Mexican line, the Sierra de San Pedro?"

"Yes."

"Wa-al, all around them air mountains is mighty rough country, and a band of outlaws—kinder brigands, you know, have taken up their quarters in them air mountains; they come out every now and then and make it lively for the miners and ranchers both in Mexico and Arizona."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"And in order to disguise themselves they wear a kind of a hood which kivers up their heads and faces, made out of wolfskin, I calculate, but they call themselves the Gray Cats."

"That is quite an idea," Blake remarked approvingly. "And I suppose this party do a regular land-office business."

"They make some big hauls once in a while. You know we have to freight all our output here to the valley of the Rio San Pedro and then up the river?"

The sport nodded.

"Wa-al, they have tried to strike our treasure train four or five times, but the marquis always sends a big armed force with it, and the Gray Cats have never been able to make the rifle."

"I see; how many are there supposed to be in this band?" the sport asked in a thoughtful way, and from the manner in which he spoke, it would seem as if some project had entered his mind.

"Wa-al, Mister Blake, that is something that nobody, I calculate, has got onto yet," Perkins replied. "Some folk say there's a dozen, mebbe fifteen or twenty, but most people don't think there is over six or eight. They work things mighty cunning, and they never go to strike a party without they have got a dead sure thing on it, and that is the reason they have allers slipped up when they tried to get at our treasure-train. When they see'd the big armed guard they skipped!"

"And it is to these scoundrels then that the Marquis de Belleville recommended me to go?"

"That is what he said."

"Well, I will bear the advice in mind, and if he succeeds in making the camp of Slide Out too hot to hold me, maybe, I will ask shelter of the Gray Cats of San Pedro!" Blake remarked in his smiling way.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CHIEF TAKES A LESSON.

THERE came a sudden interruption to the conversation.

Through the open door of the saloon stalked Bristol Bill.

Blake was leaning on the end of the counter, facing the door, so he saw the new-comer as soon as he made his appearance, and from the way that the chief of police came into the place the sport understood he was an enemy, although ignorant as to who the man was.

As it happened, Blake had his right hand in his coat pocket, and the moment the chief made

his appearance the sport's fingers closed around the butt of the revolver concealed in his pocket, so he was fully prepared for war, although no one would have suspected it, for he made no change in his position.

Bristol Bill halted just inside the doorway, and, in an extremely insolent manner, surveyed the sport from head to foot.

"Oh! you are the galoot I am looking for, I reckon!" the chief cried.

"Well, look all you like, stranger, I am on exhibition; general admission two bits, reserved seats a dollar; you pays your money and you takes your choice; which will you have?" Blake remarked in that airy, arrogant way which he could make so extremely offensive when he choose.

"Look a-hyer! you have too much lip!" the chief cried, angrily.

"Oh, well, we will cut a yard or two of it off! Anything to oblige, you know," and Blake smiled in the face of the other, as though he was the dearest friend he had in the world, but while he smiled he kept the most careful watch of the eyes of the new-comer.

Like the skilled swordsman he knew he could anticipate an attack by the expression of the eyes.

But Bristol Bill was like a good many men in this world. Although he had come there expressly to pick a quarrel with the stranger sport—to beat him within an inch of his life, yet he wanted the satisfaction of being able to explain to him in advance exactly what he was going to do.

He wanted to indulge in the flourish of trumpets which precedes the battle.

"You are too durned fresh, do you know that?" the chief growled.

"Oh, tell me something I don't know. I have heard that a hundred times before!" Blake retorted.

"Wal, you're going to be hammered until yer own mother wouldn't know ye!" cried Bristol Bill. "Is that anything new?"

"Have you got the papers to show for that?" the sport demanded, in a brisk, business-like way.

"Papers?" the other ejaculated in doubt.

"Yes, the documents to prove that you are able to properly perform the little job, for, I suppose, you are the man who is going to undertake the hammering."

Despite the awe in which the hotel-keeper stood of the marquis and his redoubtable chief of police, he could not forbear snickering at the coolness of the sport.

"Ah, wot are you grinning at?" Bristol Bill cried angrily, detecting the smile upon the face of the landlord.

"Oh, I wasn't laughing!" the host protested.

"Jest tell this galoot who I am!"

"This is Mister William Bristol, chief of police here in Slide Out," the landlord explained.

"Oh, made you chief, I suppose, on the old principle of set a rogue to catch a rogue?" Blake remarked.

Bristol Bill became red with rage.

"Durn yer eyes to blazes!" he exclaimed, "do you want me to kill you, right out?"

"Oh, no, don't be in a hurry! Give me time to pick out the spot where I want to be planted, and arrange for the funeral!"

The chief was gradually working himself up into a furious passion.

"You are mighty smart with your mouth, but you won't feel so funny arter I git through with you! I'm a friend of Howling Mike!"

"I am not at all astonished. You look to be just such another rascal."

But Bristol Bill, intent upon getting out what he had to say, went on without paying any attention to the taunt.

"You got away with him because he had so much lick on board that he wasn't able to handle himself; if he had been all right he would have wiped the floor with you."

"Well, are you all right?" the sport demanded, abruptly. "For after I thrash you I don't want you to try and creep out of it by saying that you were drunk!"

"You thrash me!" Bristol Bill howled, in scorn. "You miserable, gambling galoot! you can't whip one side of me!"

"I don't want to, but I am going to whip the whole of you, and I will do you up in such a fashion that it will make your head swim!"

And as he spoke, Blake removed his arm carelessly from the counter, and faced squarely toward the other; his arms were carried a little above the waist; a single motion would put him in fighting position.

The expression in the eyes of the other had warned him that an attack would soon be made.

"You threw Howling Mike through that window bar, and arter I hammer you all I want to, I am going to pitch you through the other one."

"Glad you told me; but you cannot spellable, you worthless scoundrel!"

This last insult brought on the attack, exactly as Blake had anticipated it would, and that was why he had hurled the epithet at the bully.

A terrific rush Bristol Bill made at the sport,

striking sledge-hammer-like blows, which surely would have damaged Blake materially if they had alighted on his person; but, in the most dextrous manner, Blake dodged under the arm of the chief—how on earth he managed to do it, neither Bristol Bill nor the landlord, who was looking on with all the eyes in his head, could tell.

Then he straightened himself up, wheeled around, and as Bristol Bill turned to pursue his nimble foe, turning in an extremely clumsy way, he got about the most outrageous lick, just under the ear, that mortal man ever received.

Bristol Bill threw up his chin, dropped his guard, staggered back, and the way that the sport improved the opportunity to "slug" the chief was wonderful.

His fists seemed to be all over the man! Smack, smack! Oh, the tattoo the iron-like knuckles played upon Bristol Bill's person!

Dazed by the hurricane of blows, the chief gave way, vainly endeavoring to shield his face with his arms.

Blake drove him directly to the window—the window unbroken, which formed so great a contrast to its shattered neighbor.

The landlord anticipated what was coming, and in haste yelled:

"Knock him through the door—it will do just as well!"

But the sport did not think so.

After getting his man just where he wanted him, he gathered all his strength to administer the final blow, and swung his right in, catching Bristol Bill on the "point" of the jaw, knocking him headfirst through the casement, completely wrecking the window, which was flimsily constructed.

CHAPTER XII.

A BOLD CHALLENGE.

THE Marquis de Belleville, and the doctor, were on the other side of the street, anxiously awaiting the accomplishment of the feat which Bristol Bill had vowed to perform.

They could distinctly hear the sound of the chief's loud voice, although they could not distinguish his words, and through the open door were able to detect that the fight had begun as soon as Bristol Bill made his attack.

The noise of the scuffle in the saloon attracted the attention of some of the citizens who happened to be near at hand, and they ran up to where the marquis and doctor stood.

They were too old birds to venture near the saloon, and so run the risk of getting shot.

"What is it—what's the trouble?" they inquired.

"Nothing much!" De Belleville replied. "Bristol Bill is hammering some sense into a strange sharp!"

Then the watchers distinguished the figure of the man being backed up to the window, and De Belleville and the doctor, immediately jumped to the conclusion that the chief was going to carry out his programme.

Smash, bang! came the man through the window, and to the utter dismay of the marquis and Escobedo, they saw that it was Bristol Bill.

The last blow, coupled with the whack his head got by coming in contact with the ground, settled the chief.

He was "knocked out," and as thoroughly as any pugilist had ever been under the rules of that noble gentleman, the Marquis of Queensberry.

The crash of the broken glass attracted the attention of everybody within a couple of hundred yards, and now that it was evident that the fight was over, all hastened to where Bristol Bill lay, senseless, on the ground.

Like Howling Mike he had been cut by the glass and looked to be far worse hurt than he really was.

"The man is dead!" the marquis cried, as he came up to where Bristol Bill lay and perceived that he betrayed no signs of life.

"Oh, no, he isn't!" exclaimed Blake, advancing through the doorway. "He is worth a dozen dead men!"

"He is only stunned. I knocked him out with a right hand swing on the point of the jaw. That will fetch a man every time, if you give it to him right!"

The crowd stared in amazement at the sport. Was it possible that this gentlemanly-looking stranger was the man who had laid out the strong-armed Bristol Bill? But those who knew the particulars of his fight with Howling Mike were not so much amazed at this new victory.

"And now then, Marquis de Belleville, since I have settled your man I want a word or two with you, the master!" Blake cried, shaking his finger at the boss of Slide Out.

"You have seen fit to warn me out of the town, and, without any reason either, for I have not been long enough in the camp to tread on your toes, or anybody else's, for that matter, but I am not going. I have an idea that this camp of Slide Out will suit me very well and it is my intention to stay here for a while; I think though that it is about time this business of setting your dogs on me is stopped!"

"Now, then, here we are, man to man! I am armed, and I have no doubt you are. If you have got anything against me, this is the time and place to settle it. I am here, and all ready for you; out with your gun, then, and go for me if you have any grudge against me; for I tell you, marquis, Blake, the Mountain Lion, don't intend to go out of this town until he is carried out, feet first!"

This bold challenge excited the greatest astonishment among the citizens, who, of course, had no idea of the interview which had taken place between the two men.

The marquis grew red, and then white; he was no coward, but after what he had seen of the sport's abilities he had no wish to meet him in single fight.

He had too much at stake to risk his life in a fight with this wandering sport. In such an encounter, to his thinking, he was risking far more than his opponent.

He hesitated for a moment before he replied, for he felt that Blake had altogether the best of the situation, and he hardly knew what to say.

His quick wits soon devised a plan of escape.

"You must really excuse me, Mr. Blake, if I decline to accept this challenge of yours," the marquis said, with a strong effort repressing the anger and annoyance which was swelling in his heart, and assuming the polished and courtly air which befitted a man who had associated with the grandees of the Old World. "Not that I fear to meet you, sir, or any other man who considers that he has been wronged by me and desires satisfaction!" the marquis declared, with his head high in the air.

"I have shown that I am a man of courage on too many occasions to need to prove it by a street fight."

"You are laboring under a misapprehension, sir; I have set no dogs on you. This gentleman, whom you have so roughly handled, is my chief of police, but he sought a quarrel with you entirely upon his own account, and it was due, I presume, to the trouble that you had with his friend, Howling Mike. You whipped Mike, and he sought satisfaction."

"Well, I reckon he has got it," Blake remarked, with a contemptuous glance at his fallen foe. "If he hasn't, he is the hardest man to satisfy that I ever ran across!"

"I admit, sir, that I did warn you out of the camp, and that was because I was informed that you were a gambler, and it is against our rules to allow card-sharps to remain in the town, but if I have been misinformed—if I have acted on false information, and hastily, I am willing to make amends—to act as a gentleman and an honest man should act."

"If you will give me your word that you do not intend to pursue gambling for a living while you remain in Slide Out, I will withdraw the warning, and extend to you the freedom of the camp."

De Belleville had made a complete back-down, and, apparently, was disposed to act in a magnanimous manner.

The sport understood the game that the other had resolved to play, though, as well as if he himself had planned it.

The two defeats that his men had received convinced him there was little to be gained by using open force, and he pretended to make a complete surrender so as to get an opportunity to try secret cunning.

But, as Blake had beaten him with his own weapon in the first encounter, the sport had no doubt in regard to holding his own in the second trial.

"Well, Marquis de Belleville, I am exceedingly glad that you have come to this conclusion!" the sport exclaimed.

"I did not come into Slide Out with the idea of making any trouble!" he protested. "I am as peaceable a man as there is in all the West, unless people undertake to tread on me, and then I am apt to fight!"

The crowd looked at each other and nodded their heads; they hadn't any doubt as to the truth of this statement, after what they had seen.

"I will give you my word in regard to the gambling: I will not gamble as a business, only play once in a while for amusement, just like any other gentleman, and as soon as I can get an opening I shall engage in some business. I am well-beeled, financially, and can afford to wait and look around me until I strike something which promises to pan out well."

"That is quite satisfactory, and I trust that in the future we will get along all right."

"I hope so," the sport responded.

Then they exchanged ceremonious bows; the marquis proceeded up the street while Blake re-entered the hotel.

Bristol Bill was carried off to the Police Headquarters and the citizens went about their business.

"Wa-al, consarn my pictur!" the landlord exclaimed, following Blake into the saloon, "if you didn't fetch the boss to a square back-down. You may be fresh, but I am calculating that you get there all the same!"

Blake laughed.

"I reckon I am going to stay yet awhile in Slide Out after all!" he declared.

CHAPTER XIII.

ISABEL'S RESOLVE.

THE reflections of the Marquis de Belleville were anything but agreeable as he proceeded on his homeward road, and the knowledge that he had only himself to thank for the check which he had met did not add to his comfort.

It was the first decided defeat which he had experienced since he founded the town.

Of course, the marquis was too old a man of the world not to know that he could not hope to always control the camp with a rod of iron. If the town grew, and fresh people came in, it stood to reason that he could not always have his own way in everything.

"If I had not challenged the fellow to this trial of strength this would not have happened," he muttered, regretfully. "But it is too late now to repine. I made a mistake, and this sharp has won the first trick in the game, but, if I am careful how I play my cards, I may arrange matters so that it will be all that he will win and in the end I will triumph."

He found Isabel awaiting him.

She had been watching for him from the window and hastened to the door to greet him.

"Is there any truth in this story that the servants are talking about?" she exclaimed. "They say that Howling Mike has been nearly killed by this man, Blake!"

"Yes, and that is not the worst of it," the marquis replied with a frown. "But come into the room where we can talk without fear of interruption."

They went into the same apartment where they had held their previous interview, and there the marquis related all that had occurred.

"It is the Fresh of 'Frisco!" Isabel declared in a tone of conviction, when the De Belleville closed his recital. "I do not think there is a doubt about it! He is acting just as he always acted in the old time. He cannot mind his own business but is always interfering. It seems to be impossible for him to keep quiet. He interfered in the scheme that Manuel was working, and succeeded in spoiling it. The man is a very demon."

"Well, if that is so, there is no use of our attempting to do anything more, for demons are immortal and cannot be killed," the marquis remarked dryly.

"You know what I mean," Isabel replied. "Although it is true this man does seem to bear a charmed life! Many a trap has been laid for him, yet he has escaped them all."

"Well, the best run of luck must end!" the marquis remarked. "The greater the luck, the sooner the chance of change."

"I have made a complete surrender, for, under the circumstances, there was no other course open to me," he continued with bitter accent. "And I feel it is the beginning of the decay of my power in the camp. This man has defied me, and others will be encouraged by his example. Let a leader once rise and he seldom lacks for followers."

"But you do not intend to give up the struggle?" Isabel inquired. "It does not matter whether he is the Blake I dread, or another. In either case he is dangerous!"

"That is true, but I think you are wrong about his being the man who has caused you so much dread. If it were he, I do not think he would take so prominent a part and thus attract attention to himself. It would be his game, it seems to me, to work in secret until he was prepared to deal you a deadly blow."

"Yes, it would seem so, but my enemy cannot keep quiet. His is such a strange nature that, even to secure the revenge he craves, I doubt if he could remain in the background."

"Well, it is a waste of time to discuss whether he is the man or not, for surmises will never settle the question. The point for us to consider is how can we best cope with him."

"Is the question such a difficult one, and we with our armed men ready at our back and call?" the woman exclaimed with a scornful smile.

"Yes, but you must remember that of the seven men he has already beaten two, and this triumph, mark ye, achieved before he has been three hours in the town!" De Belleville replied.

"And these two men," he continued, "are the leaders of the gang. It will take the steel out of the rest."

"Yes, but was it not a mistake for them to encounter this fellow with their fists?" Isabel asked. "If they had used weapons would not the result have been different?"

"That is hard to say," De Belleville replied, thoughtfully. "From the readiness the man displayed in challenging me to a duel it would seem to indicate that he had confidence in his skill."

"Yes, yes, it would seem so; but, Maurice, you made a mistake in allowing this man to suspect that his presence was unwelcome here and that you desired to drive him out. If you had kept quiet, arranged a trap, and then caught him, unawares, success would have been certain."

"Yes, but my idea was to ascertain whether he was the man you supposed him to be or not; then, during the conversation, he irritated me,

and I was idiot enough to allow my temper to get the best of me!" the marquis exclaimed.

"Well, it is not too late to try secret cunning since open force has failed. Still, if he is not the man I dread there is hardly any use of bothering with him. The game will not be worth the candle."

"That is true, although the man has humbled me, and I would go to considerable pains to square the account."

"I wish I could see him—be able to converse with him!" Isabel exclaimed. "I am sure I would be able to tell whether he is Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, no matter how well he is disguised."

"That matter is easily arranged."

"How?"

"Call upon him."

"I must have some excuse, or he will suspect that my suspicions are aroused, and then he will be upon his guard, and so increase the difficulty of striking him."

"The excuse is ready to your hand."

"Explain!"

"Catalina!"

"Ah, yes, I see!"

"He saved her life, and she is very grateful, as is but natural. I offered him a hundred dollars, and he refused it in scorn. Now then, suppose you tell Catalina that it is but right he should have something as a token of his gratitude."

"She will jump at the idea!"

"Suggest that she bestow upon him a trinket—one of her diamond rings, for instance, and offer to accompany her. Thus you will have an opportunity of coming face to face with him, and under such circumstances that he will not be apt to suspect that the sole motive for your visit is to discover whether he is here in disguise or appears in his own proper person."

Isabel reflected upon the proposition a few moments, and then she said:

"The idea is a good one, but in carrying it out we run a risk."

"What risk?"

"That Catalina will become too deeply interested in this man."

"Oh, no, she is nothing but a child!"

"Quite old enough to become infatuated, and to make trouble for us if she became so."

"Do you think there is any danger of it?"

"I am not sure, of course, yet there is always danger where a young, romantic girl is concerned. You must remember that she considers this man has a strong claim upon her; ever since you have been gone she has done nothing but talk of him; he is so different, you understand, from the majority of the men in the camp."

"If she should happen to fall in love with this sport it would be a sad blow for our superintendent, Francisco, for the young fellow is devoted to her."

"Ah, yes, Francisco," Isabel observed, absently, apparently buried in thought.

"You can see from the way he acts that the young man thinks Catalina is but little less than an angel."

"I have it!" Isabel exclaimed, abruptly.

"What?"

"An idea by means of which we can accomplish the death of this man!" the woman declared.

"That is good! explain."

"Francisco is a Cuban."

"Yes."

"Hot-blooded and quick to anger, and, if his rage against a man was once excited, he would not care how he struck so long as his revenge was satisfied!"

"Yes, I think you are right."

"We will use Catalina as a tool to lure Francisco on to attack this sport."

"The trouble is that Francisco would not stand any chance in an encounter with Blake, and if they came together the Cuban would only throw his life away."

"That is correct, and that is the point that must be impressed upon Francisco's mind—that in a fair fight he stands no chance against the sport."

"It could be done; but the object?"

"To lead him to revenge the loss of the girl he loves after the good old Spanish fashion—to strike his foe in the back with the knife of the bravo!"

The face of De Belleville lighted up.

"Upon my word, Isabel, the scheme is a cunning one!" he declared.

"Do you not think there is a good chance that it will be successful?"

"Yes, indeed I do: if we only play our cards in a proper manner! In the first place, we must contrive to bring this sharp and Catalina together."

"That can be arranged. The first move will be to have the girl give him a ring. He will be pretty certain to take that from her, and afterward Catalina is not the girl I take her to be, if she does not contrive to meet this sport, by accident, every now and then."

"Yes, she is shrewd enough, and if she takes an interest in the man, she will be sure to go out of her way to see him."

"And we can work on the Cuban; lament her

infatuation; speak dolefully of the future, and wish some stroke of fortune would remove from her path this man who will be sure to ruin all her life!" Isabel exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, the scheme is a beautiful one, and Francisco will be sure to tumble into the trap," the marquis remarked.

And then, in deep earnest, the pair fell to discussing the details of the plot, and thus we leave them.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MINERS' COUNCIL.

Of course, in so small a place as Slide Out, it did not take long for the story of the stranger sport's victories to become known to everybody in the camp, and when the miners began to flock into the town after nightfall, great was the talk that the exploits occasioned; Blake became the hero of the hour.

He held a regular levee in the hotel saloon, much to the delight of the landlord, whose bar, consequently, did a roaring trade.

It was soon apparent that, although there were a few bold souls who rejoiced that a stranger had dared to "beard the lion in his den," the Douglas in his hall," the Marquis de Belleville in his town of Slide Out, the majority of the citizens were rather inclined to regard the new-comer more in the light of an enemy than a friend.

The peculiar rule of the marquis had served to make them clannish, and the idea of this bold sport being able to force the ruler of the camp to back down excited their anger, for their local pride was wounded.

So, although the miners crowded the saloon, and gazed at the sport as though he was some curiosity placed upon exhibition, yet few of them manifested any friendly spirit.

Blake, a keen observer of men and manners, did not fail to notice that the atmosphere was rather cool, and a congenial smile appeared upon his face.

"Well, well," he muttered to himself, when he made this discovery, "it is in this little mining-camp as in the great world; these men are under an iron rule, yet, like very dogs, they are inclined to lick the hand that smites them, and to look askance and growl at the stranger who is bold enough to rebel!"

"Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow!" How extremely true those lines are! There never was a time in the history of the world when the people could not have overthrown their tyrants, if they had only chosen to put their shoulders to the wheel.

"Now, in this case, I have offered successful resistance to the boss, and if a few good men chose to side with me, there could be an end put to the rule of the Marquis de Belleville in this camp for good and all. But it is evident, from the way the poor fools look at me to-night, that they are much rather disposed to regard me in the light of an enemy rather than a friend, and if circumstances force me to fight the Frenchman, I cannot look for assistance from the men of the camp, but will find them banded together to help the boss."

Blake put no dependence upon the words of the marquis, and believed he would be attacked as soon as the other could devise a plan, and he thought it probable he might be got at by some of the police on this very evening, so he selected a corner at the end of the bar, and placed his chair there.

The wall was at his back and on his left, the bar on the right, and the only way any one could get at him was to come right up in his front.

One of the few friendly miners had taken a chair by his side, and entered into conversation with him early in the evening.

He was a middle-aged man, a big, muscular fellow, with yellow hair and beard, thickly streaked with gray.

He had introduced himself as Ben Prince—"Sandy Prince, they generally call me," he had explained, proprietor of the Tomato-can Claim, located in the first gulch below the town.

Said claim having acquired its name from the fact that Prince purchased it from its original discoverer for a can of tomatoes, the proprietor believing it to be worthless, but as the present proprietor informed the sport, in a burst of confidence, it had "panned out right well!"

When the miner proceeded to make himself so sociable the sport was inclined to look upon him with suspicion, thinking it was possible he was a spy, who had been instructed to gain his confidence, but he soon saw that he had no grounds for the suspicion.

The miner was one of the few men in the camp who was disposed to rebel against the iron rule of the Frenchman.

In a quiet way he congratulated the sport upon his victories, and remarked it was about time the marquis understood that free American citizens could not be walked over.

"This sort of government," he remarked, "doing everything for a man, and not allowing him to do anything for himself may be all very well for the folks who are used to it—who have been brought up in that way, but I don't want none of it in mine."

"Personally, I will admit, it does not make

much difference to me," he continued. "I attend to my own business, and do not have any trouble, but it kinder galls me to think that if I *did* have a dispute with the Frenchman he has got matters fixed so he could bust me out of the town and I would not be able to help myself."

"There are men enough in the camp to make a fight if they wanted so to do, and it seems to me that their chance for downing the Frenchman would be a good one," Blake remarked.

This was said for the purpose of drawing the other out and ascertaining exactly how the land lay.

"Oh, no," the miner replied with a shake of the head. "In the first place you must remember that in the Red Dragon Mine there are about fifty men, and nearly all of them are foreigners: fellows that ain't much better than a lot of brutes, and the marquis has got them so completely under his thumb that they are ready to do about as he says. Oh, I tell you, they are a hard gang and no mistake!"

"Yes, I see; it would be difficult for a few men to make head against such a force as that."

"You bet! and that is why men like myself keep our mouths shut, even if the Frenchman is a little rough once in a while."

Then, Blake proceeded to put a few questions in regard to his own case. Did Prince think the marquis would keep faith with him? his object being to learn the reputation of the Frenchman in such matters.

"Well, I reckon he is pretty square and lives up to his word tolerably decent," the miner replied. "Of course, you have given him an awful twist—thrashing two of his best men, and it would be only natural for him to want to get back at you, if he could. But as long as he has passed his word in public not to trouble you, I reckon you are pretty safe as far as any open attack is concerned. He wants everybody to believe that he is square, and he ain't likely to go for you in a way so that anybody would be able to say that he had anything to do with it."

"Yes, I see; he is not likely to order his police to attack me?"

"Oh, no; 'cos that would be a dead give-away for him; mebbe some one on 'em might go for you on his own hook, but I don't think it is likely, arter the way you mauled Bristol Bill and Howling Mike, 'cos they will be apt to reckon if you got away with them so handily, none of the rest would stand much show."

"That's one on 'em now!" exclaimed Prince, abruptly.

"One of the police?"

"Yes," and the miner described the man so the sport could identify him.

"Much obliged! It will be as well for me to get acquainted with all of the police, so I can be on the lookout for them."

"I reckon that is a first-class idee!" the miner declared. "I know 'em all, and will p'int 'em out to you as fast as they come in, and it is big money, Mister Blake, that every one of the galoots will be anxious to take a look at you to-night, jest for greens, you know, anxious to see the man that warmed the chief and the biggest fighting-man of them all."

It was as the miner anticipated.

Each one of the five men came into the saloon during the evening, took a good look at the sport, and from the way they scowled, as he remarked to Prince, Blake would have suspected that they belonged to the force commanded by Bristol Bill, even if he had not been informed.

Then the idea occurred to Blake that his companion would be a man likely to put him on the track of a claim, for the sport had come to the conclusion it would be wise for him to get out of the hotel as soon as possible, for his position there was altogether too much exposed to an attack to be pleasant.

The walls up-stairs were nothing but thin board partitions; the doors of the sleeping-rooms only defended by small belts, and it would be an easy matter for a desperate and unscrupulous foe to get at and murder a sleeping man.

What Blake wanted was a cabin, so situated that it would be difficult for a secret assassins to get at him.

He mentioned the matter to his companion.

"Well, I cannot say that I know of anything likely to suit you," Prince responded, thoughtfully. "I can't call anything to mind just now, but I tell you what, you jest git at the Chinaman cook hyer in the hotel. Hop Hi Gee. That durned John kin smell out a good claim better than a dozen white men! He has put five or six men in for good things."

"I suppose he is afraid to hold them himself after his experience with the Red Dragon property," Blake suggested.

"Oh, you have heard of that air affair?" Prince said, speaking in a cautious tone.

"Yes; and it seems to me to be a shame the way the Chinaman was robbed of his property."

"Hush! don't speak so loud," the miner warned. "I don't s'pose you keer much, but don't git me into a scrape!"

"You are right, though," he continued. "It was the biggest, bare-faced steal that ever was! The marquis and his gang jumped the claim, and took it right away from the heathen."

"And what did he do?" asked Blake, his eyes kindling with flames.

"Not a thing! jest smiled as if he thought it was all right, took his tools and trotted off. If he had been a white man he would have laid for the marquis and killed him, sure, or tried to, you mind?"

"I will see the John; does he speak so he can be understood?"

"Oh, yes, twists his i's into l's, and talks double e's on pretty lively, but you can savvy him."

The rest of the conversation is of no import, and we will not detail it.

At midnight Blake went up-stairs, but he did not go into No. 10. He slipped into No. 6, an unoccupied room. Took the blanket from his cot, made a bed in front of the door on the floor, and lay in such a way that any attempt to open the door would wake him immediately. And on this rough couch he slept as sweetly as though it had been the softest bed in the world.

He was not disturbed during the night.

CHAPTER XV.

A TALK ABOUT THE JOHN.

BLAKE was up early in the morning; he proceeded down-stairs to the restaurant and got his breakfast.

The Grand Hotel was on the European plan, so much for a room and so much for a meal, and what you did not get, you did not pay for.

Blake took occasion to compliment the landlord upon the goodness of the breakfast, although to tell the truth, it was extremely "rocky" to use the miner's slang.

"You must have a good cook—is it that Chinaman I saw?" he said.

"Yes, Hop Hi Gee that I was telling you about, you know." Perkins replied, casting a cautious glance around to be sure that no one was near to hear him.

Blake noticed the action.

"Nice kind of a camp this is where a man does not say what he likes without first making sure that there is no spy near to carry tales!" the sport exclaimed in disgust.

"'Tis kinder rough on a man," the landlord admitted.

"By the way, that miner that I was talking with last night advised me to see this Chinaman in regard to a claim. He said the John would be more apt to put me on a good 'lead' than any man in the camp."

"That's as true as preaching!" the landlord declared. "I would say the same thing."

"I will have a talk with him. Will I find him in the kitchen?"

"No, this is his day off; arter he cooks the breakfast he clears out and will not show up until night, but I kin tell you where you kin find him though."

"That will do. I just as lief take a walk as not."

"You go out of the hotel and start as if you were going to the Red Dragon Mine, but, arter you pass the next house, you bear off to the left, leave the valley and go up to the foot-hills; you keep right on past these claims and at the end of the trail, right back of the Red Dragon property, the Chinaman has located a mine."

"Is it good for anything?"

"I reckon it ain't worth much, but you kin never tell anything from what these yaller heathens say; if one of them was taking out a hundred dollars a day he would pull a poor mouth and swar he wasn't getting more than enough to keep him from starving!"

"Yes, and a good reason they have for it, too, for if a Chinese is known to have a paying claim the odds are a hundred to one some gang of white thieves will jump it."

"Say! it seems to me as if you were kinder in favor of the Johns," the landlord remarked.

"I am kinder in favor of honesty, and I despise as a miserable coward the man who tries to trample on another because he is the weaker party!" Blake declared.

"Wa-al, I s'pose you ain't far from right, that's gospel, but men won't live up to it."

"Then they ought to be made to do right."

"That's true, but you cannot allers work it. But, as I was saying, I don't rally believe the Chinaman is making much out of his mine, 'cos none of them up in that direction have ever amounted to anything, but then the Johns, you know, are satisfied to work claims that white men leave in disgust."

"Yes, they will manage to pick up a living where decent white men will starve. If you want to know my sentiments on the Chinese question, I don't take any stock in the Johns, and I think they ought to be kept out, for they are an alien race and will never assimilate with us, but that is no reason why the whites should ill-treat those who are here. If I make a deal with Hop Hi Gee I shall give him just as square a trade as though he was a white man." And then Blake departed.

"That man is the queerest cuss that ever struck this town!" the landlord exclaimed. "And if he don't get killed before he has lived here a month, he is a fool for luck!"

The sport found the trail easily enough, and was soon up in the foot-hills. Five minutes' walk brought him to the slab shanty which the

patient Chinaman had erected; but when Blake looked around for the mine he was not able to discover any, although there were great piles of dirt in the neighborhood showing that excavating was going on somewhere near.

"I have it!" the sport exclaimed. "The John has built his cabin over the mouth of his mine so as to keep his operations secret."

Then Blake took a survey of the neighborhood.

As the landlord had said, the Chinaman's cabin was directly back of the Red Dragon Mine, and only about a thousand yards from it, and had it not been for a slender belt of pines that grew in the first range of the foot-hills, the Red Dragon works in the valley below, would have been in plain sight.

"Oho! I think I see Master John's plan!" he exclaimed. "The Red Dragon lode runs this way, and he is sinking a shaft hoping to strike the vein, and the chance is good, too, that the heathen will do the trick."

Then Blake advanced and pounded briskly on the door.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CLEVER TRICK.

No answer came to the knock, so Blake picked up a stout stick and beat a vigorous tattoo upon the wooden barrier.

This produced the desired effect.

The sport detected that some one was moving within the cabin, then a rough voice cried out:

"Who's thar?"

No Chinaman ever spoke in such a tone, and for a moment Blake was under the impression that he had made a mistake, and was at the wrong cabin; but he was at the end of the trail, and no other house in sight.

A suspicion that something was wrong immediately entered his mind.

As a rule in the mining region, when a man knocks at a door, it is opened at once or the applicant is bid to come in.

This inquiry then aroused his suspicions.

"I want the John!" he exclaimed, disguising his voice and speaking with the thick tones of a man well soaked in liquor; and as he spoke he slipped both of his revolvers from their holsters and took them in his hands, ready for action.

"He ain't here!" responded the voice.

"Yes, he is, durn yer yaller skin, you cussed heathen! Do you s'pose I don't know yer voice?" Blake responded.

This answer convinced the man within that the applicant for admission must be very drunk indeed or he never could have made such a mistake.

"Go 'way from thar, you drunken fool, or I'll come out and kick the stuffin' outen you. I ain't no Chinaman. What do yer want?"

"Want to buy a rabbit."

"Ain't got no rabbits—git!"

"Ain't you goin' to lemme in, John?"

"I tell you John ain't hyer. Go 'way, or I'll come out an' warm ye!"

"If you don't lemme in, John, I'll kick the durned ole door down!" and to give due emphasis to the threat, the sport banged away at the door.

The rage of the man within was now excited, and he hastened to remove the bar which guarded the door so that he might come forth and thrash the supposed drunkard.

The door flew open, and the two rough-looking fellows who were in the house gaped into the muzzles of Blake's leveled revolvers.

"I reckon I've got that rabbit!" the sport remarked.

Never were two men more taken by surprise.

They were well-armed, but their weapons were in their belts; they were completely helpless, and at the mercy of the sport.

A single glance into the interior of the cabin told the story to the acute Mr. Blake.

In one corner on his knees, was the Chinese, trembling with fright.

The two men had lain in wait for Hop Hi Gee, taken him by surprise, carried him into the cabin with the idea of despoiling him of any money that he might have accumulated.

"Throw up your hands, or I'll drill a hole through the pair of you before you can say scat!"

Up went the hands of the two; they were completely cowed by the determined sport.

"They were going to go through you for your little wealth, eh, John?" quoth the sport.

The Chinaman attempted to speak, but his teeth chattered so with fear that he was unable to utter a word.

"And I arrived just in time to spoil the leetle game," Blake continued.

"No sich thing!" protested one of the men, "we were only making a friendly call."

"Oh, a friendly call!" and as he spoke, Blake, for the first time, noticed that the Chinaman had the noose of a lariat around his neck.

"And during this friendly call you intended to hang John here, all in the most friendly way, of course!" exclaimed Blake, sarcastically.

The ruffian saw that it would be merely a waste of words to attempt to lie out of it, after being caught thus, red-handed, in the act, and so he tried a different task.

"Wa-al, we were having a little foolishness

with the John, but we did not intend to hang him, only to scare him a bit. The fact is, we are short of cash, and we thought it a shame that a darned heathen, like this John, should have plenty of dust, while honest white men couldn't make a raise, so we proposed to him to lend us a few ducats to help us on our way; he got sassy and so we tried to skeer him."

"Of course that are what Johns are for," Blake responded. "But you will not make a raise out of this particular John this time! Come out!"

And Blake stepped back as he spoke.

As promptly as soldiers obey the word of command, the fellows came out of the cabin.

"I will give you until I count ten to get out of this; at ten I open fire upon you; and as I am a dead-shot I reckon I will be able to fix both of you for planting unless you skip mighty lively!"

"One!"

Away dashed the pair at a wonderful rate of speed.

They were ungainly, awkward, clumsy fellows, yet they galloped down the rough, uneven trail with the speed of champion pedestrians.

Long before Blake had finished the count they were out of revolver range.

"Those fellows haven't got any more sand or backbone than a jelly-fish!" Blake remarked in contempt.

The Chinaman had come to the doorway and, with a broad grin was watching the flight of the ruffians.

"John, I reckon those fellows were putting you through a course of sprouts," the sport observed, turning to the Chinese.

"Yes, yes, vely bad mans!" the heathen declared.

"A couple of miserable cowards!" Blake exclaimed in contempt. "Here they were two to one, and yet they let me run them as though they were nothing but a couple of school-boys! If they had any sand or backbone, they would have pulled their tools, as soon as they got well out of range, and then come back to make it hot for me."

It was evident though that the two had no desire to test the prowess of the sport, for they never even stopped to look back after they once started, but hurried forward toward the camp.

Blake put up his revolvers and then took a look at Hop Hi Gee.

He was an elderly man, and though his features seemed to be as stolid and wooden-like as the rest of his race, yet Blake, from his long residence on the Pacific Slope—being well-acquainted with the Chinese, fancied that this John was rather a superior one.

"Your house is as dark as a packet," the sport remarked, casting a glance over the shoulder of the Chinaman into the cabin.

"Yes, muchee dark," the other replied.

There were no windows to the house, but high up in the side wall, near the eaves, were a few holes through which came enough light to enable one to move about when the door was shut.

Blake cast a glance around.

No one was in sight, nor was there any "cover" near large enough to shelter an eaves-dropper.

"John, I have come to have a talk with you, and I reckon we can fire away right out here without danger of our conversation being overheard."

"Yes, file away!" the Chinaman repeated.

There was a stump at hand and Blake seated himself upon it, while the Chinaman squatted upon a boulder that cropped out of the earth near the door of the cabin.

"John, it was a lucky thing for you that I happened to come along as I did," Blake remarked.

"Yes, yes, muchee bad mans, bang Chinaman no telles 'bout hab dust. Chinaman say no savey. Bad mans say dam!—bang Chinaman!" the heathen explained.

"Do you know the men?"

"Yes, yes, Led Dragon!" and he pointed in the direction of the mine.

"Oh, Red Dragon chaps, eh?"

"Not now, gettee gland bounce!"

"Ah, they have been discharged."

"Yes, kickee out—N. G.!"

"And they reckoned to make a raise out of you to help them on their travels."

"Chinaman telles no savey dust—'too thin!' bad mans say—takee rope, makee Chinaman savey!"

"Well, that is a good way of refreshing a man's memory, but it is rather rough on the man," the sport remarked. "John, I have pulled you out of a pretty bad hole, and I hope, for the credit of the almond-eyed sons of the Far East, that you are duly grateful."

The Chinaman studied the face of the sport for a few moments, then he appeared to be absorbed in the distant scenery.

Blake understood that the man was meditating and so waited patiently.

In a couple of minutes the Chinaman turned his face again to Blake and, "with a smile that was child-like and bland," asked:

"How fixee? Want catchee dust, maybe? Hop Hi Gee no savey dust—laise some, maybe—how muchee dust?"

Blake laughed.

"Ob, no, I don't want your money, I have plenty of my own. I was only trying to show you that you might look upon me in the light of a friend," he explained.

"Chinaman see, allee samee 'Melican man."

"Do you know me, John?"

"Bim—bim!" and the heathen went through a pantomimic representation of striking at a foe.

"Ah, I see: perhaps you witnessed those little pic-nics?"

"Yes, see 'em—hole in kitchen wallee."

"Ah, yes; then you understand that I am no friend to the Marquis de Belleville, or any of his gang?"

A single glance of fire shot from the eyes of the Chinaman at the mention of the Frenchman's name, but so rapid and evanescent that if Blake had not been on the watch it would have escaped him.

"Aha! I see you are not disposed to look upon the man who has robbed you of your property with as kindly eyes as people imagine."

"One Chinaman—heap 'Melican man—whatee do, hey?" the other questioned.

"Join in with the 'Melican man who has dared to take the war-path against this thief of a Frenchman, and who made him take water right in the main street of his own town!"

Again the Chinaman studied Blake's face, and then, lost himself in contemplation of the distant peaks; and it was fully five minutes before he spoke, then, with the bland smile and the idiot-like expression, he softly said:

"John no savey!"

Blake laughed, outright.

"John, old man, you take the cake—not only the cake but the whole cake-shop; I have seen a good many Johns in my time, but you are the king! you are suspicious of me, and doubt my good faith, yet I have just saved your life, for there is no doubt that those scoundrels would have hung you if you had not given up your dust, and if you had, I reckon they would have killed you, anyway, on the principle that dead men tell no tales, so you can safely say that you owe your life to me.

"You have reasons to hate this Frenchman, and of course you do hate him, for he robbed you of your property in the most outrageous way and if you did not feel a desire to be avenged upon him, then, dear John, you would be more than a man and ought to be transformed into an angel, adorned with a pair of A No. 1 wings and shipped to dance in the Chinaman's realms of bliss instantler.

"You conceal the feeling and smile in the face of the man who kicks you because you know you are powerless to help yourself.

"But now I offer you my aid. I bear this Frenchman no love, and I shall not rest satisfied until I have wrested from him all that he owns in this camp, and, after that, either killed or driven him in disgrace from the town!"

The Chinaman listened intently, and a look of wonder was in his funny little eyes.

"You see, John, I trust you, though you are not inclined to trust me," the sport continued. "I reveal my game freely to you, for I know the men of your race pretty well; I lived for years in California and mixed freely with them and I am aware that, as a rule, they can be trusted to keep a secret far better than white men.

"It is my purpose to pull down this Frenchman! I could settle the matter in short order by picking a quarrel, and putting a ball into him, but that is not my game; I want to ruin him first—to pull him down gradually and enjoy his vain struggles.

"In this work I need your aid. Do not be alarmed! I can arrange the matter so that no one will know that you are mixed up in the affair in any way."

The Chinaman nodded; a cunning light appeared in his eyes, and Blake, who was on the watch, understood that his words had made an impression.

"And, by the way, John, I have got on to your little game here," and with a smile the sport nodded to the cabin.

A look of alarm appeared on the face of the heathen.

"No savey game," he murmured.

"It was a shrewd device and shows that you know a thing or two about mining. You are sinking a shaft here, hoping to cut the Great Dragon vein."

Despite the stolid composure of the Chinaman he started and cast a glance of alarm at the sport.

Blake laughed.

"Don't be frightened! Your secret is safe. I want you for a partner, and if I didn't, I would not betray you. That is not the kind of a man I am!"

"What wantee Chinaman to do, hey?" he asked.

"In the first place I want to buy an interest in the Red Dragon Mine."

"No hab, how sellee?"

"In regard to that: sell me the interest and I will see to getting possession. But you will perceive that as an outsider, without any claim to the mine, I cannot very well go to the French-

man and say, 'Here, you are on my property and I want you to git!'

The Chinaman chuckled; the thought that it was possible such a command would be addressed to the man who had robbed him of his property was a balm to his wounds.

"That pleases you, eh?" quoth Blake. "Well, you give me the right to be able to say such a thing to this polished European thief, and you can bet all the dust you can scrape together that he will hear it from me inside of six months, and I will not say it either until I have my arrangements so made that he will be compelled to get out."

The Chinaman nodded and rubbed his hands together softly.

"Vely good! me do it."

"Then I want to buy a share in this claim here."

"No catchee dust," the heathen replied, shaking his head.

"No, not until you strike the Red Dragon vein, and of course there is a chance that you will not hit it."

"But I don't care anything about the mine. The cabin is all I want. I must have a headquarters, for I cannot carry on the fight from the hotel. I must have some place where the Frenchman's gang will find it different to get at me. This place will answer, but it would be better though if it was not at the end of the trail—if there was another way to get out."

The Chinaman looked wise, then nodded, grinned, and held up three fingers.

"Blind trails—three!"

"Three blind trails?"

"You bet—catchee heap dust! One down—vallee—above Led Diagon—one, straight, comes to main trail up, top side hill—one, over top side hill," and he pointed to the west, "go Rio San Pedro vallee!"

"Just exactly what I want, for by means of these secret blind trails, I will be able to get in and out of the valley without any one being the wiser for it."

"Well, John, what do you say—will you trade? I want to know as soon as I can, for I expect a pard along in a few days, who is coming to help me fight the big war that I am going to take upon my shoulders."

"All right!" the Chinaman exclaimed, after a moment's thought, "mesellee you! You catchee Frenchman—darn lascall!"

"Yes, he is a rascal, and no mistake, but we will fix him!"

In an hour Blake took the road back to the camp, and in his pocket he had the contracts he desired.

Now he was ready for war.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A GENTLEMAN AND A SPORT.

As the scheming Isabel expected, Catalina fell readily into the snare.

It was an easy matter to get the girl to speak of the sport, and an apparently accidental remark of Madame de Belleville caused Catalina to declare that she should not feel satisfied until she had in some way way shown her appreciation of the service which the stranger had rendered her.

Then Isabel mentioned that the marquis had tried to get Blake to take a hundred dollars and he had refused.

The girl flushed immediately.

"Oh, madame, he is a gentleman, and wouldn't take money!" she exclaimed.

The lip of Madame de Belleville curled; the enthusiasm of the girl was distasteful to her, but as she had an object in view, she kept back the sharp remark that was on her tongue, and suggested that if Catalina chose to present the gentleman with one of her diamond rings he would, in all probability, be pleased with the offer, and accept it."

"Oh, yes, I think he will, madame, that is not like money!" the girl exclaimed. "And if I offer it to him myself, I feel sure he will not refuse."

"Just what I was going to suggest," the elder lady remarked. "And I will go with you, for I have a curiosity to see the gentleman."

Catalina ran up-stairs to her jewel-box, and from among her treasures selected a solitaire diamond ring.

"The stone is not a very expensive one, so he cannot object to it on that score," the girl murmured.

Returning to Isabel, she displayed the ring, and the moment Madame de Belleville's eyes fell upon the trinket she started. Her emotion was so apparent, that even the innocent young girl did not fail to notice it.

"What is the matter, madame?" she inquired.

"Nothing; a sudden faintness, that is all. Get your things, and we will go at once."

The girl hastened to obey, and while Isabel was arraying herself for the street, she murmured:

"Of all the rings she possessed to think that she should choose that particular one! It is the hand of fate!"

The ladies proceeded to the hotel, and the

landlord ushered them into a small apartment on the first floor, which he dignified by the title of parlor.

Mr. Blake was out, he said, but as he had been gone for some time it was probable that he might return at any moment, so the ladies decided to wait.

Catalina had been brooding over some stories that one of the gossiping servants of the mansion had told her, and she resolved to mention the matter to Isabel.

"Is it true, madame, that this Mr. Blake has had a terrible quarrel with some of the police and pretty nearly killed two of them?"

"Yes, it is true."

"Pedro said it was, but I could hardly believe it; I thought there must be some mistake, for Mr. Blake seemed so quiet."

"In this case, it is the old proverb, you know, 'still waters run deep,'" Isabel replied.

"I do not understand it at all," Catalina exclaimed. "Pedro spoke very harshly of the gentleman—declared he was a gambler, and said the marquis had warned him to leave town, but he had declared he would not go, and, finally, to avoid trouble with the desperado, the marquis said he might stay if he would agree not to gamble."

"Pedro talks too much! I shall have to give him a hint to put a curb on his tongue," Isabel remarked, tartly.

"Oh, I suppose I was to blame, because I was interested in the matter, and questioned him," Catalina explained. "But is it all true?"

"Yes, I believe it is."

"But one thing I do not understand, madame, why should there be an objection to Mr. Blake staying in the camp because he gambles, when almost everybody here does nothing else every night?"

"How is it that you know aught of such things?" the lady inquired, coldly.

"Why, madame, I am neither blind nor deaf!" the girl replied, "and I should have to be both not to know what is going on in the camp. Why, there is a game, as the gentlemen call it, going on at our own house, almost every night. I know, because Francisco has spoken of it. One morning in particular I remember he told me he was not going to gamble any more, because on the previous night he had lost a whole month's pay and he could not afford to indulge in such luxuries."

"He might have found something better to talk about it seems to me!" Madame de Belleville exclaimed, evidently annoyed.

"But the point is, madame, where nearly all the gentlemen are inveterate gamblers, why should they object to Mr. Blake?"

"You do not understand; he is a professional gambler, he plays for a living and does nothing else."

"Oh, that makes a difference?"

"Yes, the others merely play for amusement."

"And that condones the sin!" and the rich, full lip of the girl curled in contempt. "Ah, madame, I believe I never shall be wise enough to see the difference between the gentleman who gambles for amusement, and the professional who makes a business of it."

"You are too young to understand such matters!" the elder lady retorted. "The gentleman is a gentleman, and the gambler is always a low, mean fellow!"

"And yet the gentleman seeks him out to play with him. If the gentleman would not gamble the gambler's occupation would be gone," Catalina remarked, displaying more temper than the other had ever seen her evince before.

"I am glad I understand all about it now," she continued, "for I will be able to advise Mr. Blake. I shall say to him, 'Get a mine or engage in some business in the daytime' and at night you can gamble all you like and no one will object."

The entrance of Perkins at this point interrupted the conversation.

"Mr. Blake is coming up the street, ladies!" he announced.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEAD MAN'S RING.

The sport was somewhat surprised when the landlord informed him, upon entering the saloon, that there were a couple of ladies waiting to see him in the parlor.

Naturally, Blake inquired as to who they were and his surprise increased when he was told that Madame de Belleville was one of them.

"Now, then, what is the little game?" he murmured as he proceeded to the parlor.

"Has the marquis got an idea in his head that I am likely to prove dangerous and so has sent his wife to spy out the land? Does he think the woman's wits are stronger than his own?"

"It can hardly be possible that she can have a suspicion of the truth? No, no! there is nothing to lead to it—nothing but a guilty conscience."

The ladies rose when he entered the room and Catalina, advancing, tendered her hand in the frankest manner.

Then she introduced Madame de Belleville.

Blake bowed, and expressed his pleasure at the meeting with as easy politeness as if he had

been used all his life to dancing attendance upon ladies in fashionable drawing-rooms.

Catalina resumed her seat, Blake helped himself to a chair, and then the girl, in her frank outspoken way came right to the object of her call.

"Mr. Blake, I have been greatly annoyed because I could not show my appreciation in any way for the great service which you rendered me—"

"Pray don't mention it!" he exclaimed. "As I told you before, I am amply rewarded by the fact that I was able to be of service to you."

"That may satisfy you, but it does not satisfy me," she replied, with a charming smile. "I could not think of anything I could do, but Madame de Belleville came to my rescue and suggested a means by which I could, in a measure, show my appreciation of the service you so gallantly performed."

Quick as lightning the thought flashed into the brains of the sport that if the suggestion came from the woman it was likely that it covered some trap.

Of course there was nothing to lead to this suspicion, except the distrust which he had of the wife of the marquis, but, being suspicious, he was on his guard.

He did not speak, merely bowed and smiled. "If you will accept this slight token from me—this diamond ring—not because of its value, but because it expresses the heart-felt gratitude of a grateful girl."

And that Catalina meant every word she said was apparent, and never had the really beautiful girl looked more beautiful than now when, with the soft flush on her cheeks, and her brilliant eyes beaming full of life and fire, she rose and tendered the ring.

Blake advanced and took the trinket.

"Under the circumstances it would be churlish indeed were I to refuse the gift, and therefore I accept it with pleasure, and hope you will never have cause to regret the day when you bestowed it upon me."

As he spoke, although addressing this speech to the girl, yet he was watching the face of Isabel, and in her eyes he saw the snake-like glitter which heralded the coming of a blow; so he was doubly on his guard.

"The ring is valuable for association's sake," Isabel remarked. "More to me though than to this young lady, for it once belonged to my brother, Manuel!"

And, as she pronounced the name, her eager eyes were on his face, anxious to see if he betrayed any emotion.

But none was written there; being fully warned he was prepared for the stroke.

"I was going to remark that it seemed more like a gentleman's ring than a lady's trinket," Blake observed, examining it. "You may be sure, Miss Catalina, that I shall prize it highly!"

A few more ceremonious words and the interview ended.

Isabel's brain was in a whirl when she walked up the street. She knew not what to think.

If it was the Fresh of 'Frisco his disguise was perfect. Reason said it was not, but the dull fear that tugged at her heart-strings declared that it was!

CHAPTER XIX. THE NEW PARD.

THAT night the camp had a bit of news to gossip over.

The new-comer, Blake, had bought the Chinaman's claim up in the foot-hills, and publicly expressing his belief that there was a big thing in the "lead," if it was properly worked, had said he was willing to take in a partner, or two, if there was anybody 'round who desired to go into the scheme.

But none of the miners took kindly to the idea.

There had been half a dozen attempts to strike "pay-dirt" up in that region, and as no one had ever succeeded in making it pay, the town was of the opinion that the Chinaman had "played it low-down" on Blake.

In fact, it was openly asserted that if the sport, upon examination, had become satisfied there was money in the property, then the heathen Chinese, with the remarkable cunning of his race, had "salted" the mine and thus fooled the sport with the belief that it was far more valuable than it would turn out to be.

Of course these reports came to Blake's ears, but he laughed at the idea.

"I am no tenderfoot to buy a salted mine!" he exclaimed. "I know the claim don't look as if there was much money in it, and that all the attempts to strike lodes in the neighborhood has failed, but the trouble has been that all the parties have only scratched the surface. From the nature of the soil I am satisfied there is gold there, if you only go down deep enough, but that costs money, you know, and that is why I am willing to take a partner."

But as one of the veterans remarked—and the joke had great success—"the sport might be willing, but the partner wasn't."

On the next day though, a stranger made his appearance in the camp; a well-built man with a full beard and the general appearance of a

"prospector," which idea his tools and grub outfit, borne on the back of a patient little horse, carried out.

Dave Randolph he called himself, and when he told the landlord at the Grand Hotel that he was tired of prospecting and would settle down if he got a chance to buy a good claim, or a share in one, Perkins thought of Blake's words and sent for the sport.

He came, carried the stranger off to see the property, and that night the camp had more food for gossip, for the news was made public that the stranger had bought a share in Blake's claim.

Wildcat! was the significant name which some smart Aleck had applied to the mine when the news came out that Blake had bought it, and when the sport heard of this, he said he thought it was a first-class name; Wildcat it should be.

And Catalina, when she heard of the circumstance it made her heart thrill with joy, for she fancied that Blake had so named the claim in remembrance of the adventure on the mountain-side.

After Isabel had returned from her interview with Blake the marquis had asked if she had satisfied herself about the man, and she replied in the negative.

"His disguise is so good that it deceives even my eyes!" she asserted. "Yet, in spite of the fact that I cannot recognize him, I feel certain he is the man I dread, and he has hunted me down, like a very sleuth-hound, and; when the time comes, he will strike a blow which will amply revenge him for the past."

"Well, he cannot pull you down without upsetting me also," the marquis remarked. "And though I think there is a doubt as to his being your ancient foe, yet there is none in my mind that we may look upon him as an enemy rather than a friend, and we must crush him as soon as possible."

"Catalina too; I do not like the tone the girl adopts in regard to him. I thought her a child, but I begin to believe she is in love with the fellow," the marquis continued.

"Did I not hint that there was danger of it?" Isabel exclaimed.

"Yes; I did not think so then; but I do now. I am going ahead on the Francisco idea. 'Already I have instilled poison in the young man's mind, and he is beginning to watch the girl; when he reaches fever-heat I shall let fall a hint which will suggest the bravo's knife to him, and it is possible that he will succeed in ridding us of this intruder.'"

And thus the precious pair plotted against the man they both feared and hated.

At the very moment that this conversation was going on between the marquis and his wife, Blake and his new pard sat down in the cabin of the Wildcat Mine to indulge in their first confidential talk.

"Well, Dave, I think we have worked this business to the Queen's taste!" Blake exclaimed.

"Yes, no one in the town suspects that we are old pards."

"If they did, it would look as if we had some design in coming to the camp one after the other and suspicion might be excited."

"How goes the game?"

"Well, it is going to be a difficult one," Blake replied, slowly. "The camp is so different from what I expected. When I heard that Isabel Escobedo had come from France with a French husband, a marquis, and they had gone into mining on a great scale in this valley, it was my idea to come here, and the first move was to quietly show this nobleman what a she-devil he had taken to wife; but, upon investigation, I find the man to be as big a rascal as any of the Escobedo line, and that is saying a good deal, you know."

The other assented to this.

"It is my idea that the man is no more a marquis than I am, but some European rascal who has been hunted out of the old country; most certainly he has played the rascal here."

"He is evidently in dread that some one will come into the camp and wage war upon him, and so he has arranged things in such a way as to keep the people under his thumb, and eject any one who does not please him."

"It was my idea when I first struck the town that I would build up a party against him, but it cannot be done without I have five or six men to start on."

"And if the marquis looks after the valley so closely it will be no easy job to smuggle such a number as that into the town without exciting suspicion," the other observed thoughtfully.

"I have an idea; in the Sierra de San Pedro there is a band of outlaws who call themselves the Gray Cats of San Pedro. I intend to visit these Gray Cats and see if I cannot use them in my schemes."

"That might be done."

"I but waited for your arrival, so I could have you here on the watch during my absence. I shall be after those fellows at once now."

"Yes, the quicker we get our men organized the better."

"The first thing after we get our army ready will be to attack the mine. The marquis jumped the claim, held then by a Chinaman. I have

bought his right, and when I am prepared, I will play upon this Frenchman the self-same game that he played on the John."

"He will have no right to complain as long as he begun it."

"But we must work very quietly, for if the Frenchman gets an inkling of what danger threatens him he will be able to prepare for the struggle, and as he can count on sixty or seventy men, if he is given time to get them together, if we do not take him unawares, we stand no chance at all."

"Very true; everything depends upon the surprise."

"Yes, I fancy that Isabel Escobedo suspects who I am, for she put me to a severe test the other day, by getting this girl Catalina to give me a ring which once belonged to that scoundrel, Manuel Escobedo."

"She did not catch me though, for her eyes warned me of danger, and I was upon my guard."

"It was a severe test."

"Yes, she fancied that if I was the Fresh of 'Frisco, I would surely betray myself when suddenly told that the ring I held in my hand belonged to the man I killed. But I am not superstitious, besides, I am not sure that it was I that killed the man. He fell in the fight—it was a general one, and he was killed on the retreat, if I remember aright; no one can be certain who fired the death shot; it might have been you or some one of the others, as well as I."

"No doubt about that."

"And then I do not understand the mystery in regard to this beautiful young girl, Catalina Blanco she is called, a relative of the Escobedos; but born in Texas of a French mother, so she said, but as her mother died when she was too young to remember anything of her, all she knows is what she has been told."

"I do not understand it, but when I look on her face, another one seems to look out of it at me. The thought has come to me that perhaps she is Isabel Escobedo's child. I know nothing of the woman's life before I met her on the Rio Grande; she may have been married a half a dozen times for aught I know."

"The girl is evidently worth something to these people, or else they would not take the care of her that they do, but what the bond is, whether of blood or interest, is more than I can tell."

"It does seem to be something of a mystery," the other remarked.

"I will ferret it out in time, but the whole game is going to be slow work, for the marquis is so firmly entrenched here, that it will be a tremendous task to overthrow him. I must give him war to the knife. The camp is a mean, miserable one, anyway—I mean the people of course. It is the old story, 'like master, like man.' There are a few good men in it, but they hardly dare to say that their souls are their own; out of a population of about a hundred, the marquis can count on sixty sure, perhaps seventy."

"That is big odds."

"Yes, the miners are an ignorant lot, nearly all foreigners; but there is one thing in our favor; when it comes to a fight they will not stand up to it like our own men. The Frenchman knows this too."

"I have got it in for this town. I propose to draw a circle of fire around it. During the next month I will make it warm for the men of Slide Out, and this Frenchman in particular—that is, if I can do anything with this outlaw band of the Sierra de San Pedro. To-morrow I will see in regard to that."

And when that morrow came, bright and early Blake departed, mounted on the patient burro.

CHAPTER XX.

THE GRAY CATS.

THE adventurer rode down the trail leading from Slide Out to the main road, which followed the course of the Rio San Pedro; then he turned to the southward and proceeded as though bound for the Presidio San Pedro, the first town on the Mexican side of the border, but after crossing the frontier, he discerned to the eastward the rocky range, the Sierra de San Pedro.

On the river, just about on a line with the distant hills, was a sheep ranch, and as night was coming on, Blake stopped for shelter.

The rancher was an ugly, surly-looking Mexican, who eyed the applicant for a night's lodging with considerable suspicion and commenced to question him as to who he was, where had he come from, and where was he bound.

Blake answered in the frankest manner, apparently, just as if it was a common thing for a man to be cross-examined by every stranger.

He had come from the mining-camp of Slide Out—had got into trouble there with the Frenchman—had been run out of the town, and as he could not go north on account of some little disputes he had got into regarding the ownership of certain horses, he was obliged to go over the border, as the men with whom he had disputed about the steeds would most certainly hang him if they could succeed in catching him. His

name was Bill Davis—Slippery Bill, he was generally termed, a gambler by profession, and he reckoned he could hold his end up with any man in the business.

As to where he was bound, he was not sure; he was heading for Presidio San Pedro, but whether he would stop there, or go on, depended upon what he could make in the town.

He was clean broke, wanted money badly, and if he didn't strike some streak of luck pretty soon, he "reckoned" he would have to try his hand at a little road-agent business and "hold" some traveler up.

Blake made his confession in the most matter-of-fact way, just as if he took pride in being a rascal of the first water.

He fancied that he had taken the measure of his man accurately though.

The ranch was a lonely one—the proprietor looked like a scoundrel, and the idea had come into the adventurer's head that, as this was the nearest hacienda to the Sierra de San Pedro Range, it was possible the man might be in league with the outlaw band.

It is necessary to the existence of all such brigands to have spies upon whom they can depend for information.

"Well, you are a bad egg, ain't ye?" the Mexican exclaimed, a grin upon his ugly countenance.

"It is not my fault!" Blake protested. "The world owes me a living, and I must have it! Besides, I have been driven into this kind of a life, because I have not had justice done me. The world has set out to crush me, and I would be a fool if I did not strike back whenever I can. A merry life, even if it is a short one! That's my motto!"

The Mexican grinned in response.

"You are welcome to stay as long as you like," the rancher said. "I can appreciate your situation, for I have been in trouble myself. I am from Durango, and, if I had my rights, I would be now enjoying a fine piece of property there, instead of living here on the frontier. But it is a long lane that has no turning," he added, with the philosophy so natural to the Spanish-speaking race. "One of these days I will go back and stick a knife in the men who have wronged me. I will do it as soon as I have money enough to pay lawyers and judges, so I can get off if I am unlucky enough to be caught."

"You have got it down fine!" Blake declared. "A man can do anything if he has got money enough to see him through. I don't make any bones of saying that I would go into anything if there was a good stake to be made by it. Maybe you thought I was joking when I said I would do a little road-agent business, but I wasn't! I am down on my luck and must make a raise, somehow!"

"You ought to join the Sierra de San Pedro band," the Mexican remarked in a careless way. "They are a brave lot of fellows, they say; make plenty of money and live like princes!"

"That is just the kind of life I would like!" Blake declared emphatically.

This was the point to which he had hoped to lead the Mexican.

"I suppose you have heard of the band—the Gray Cats of San Pedro?"

"Oh, yes, I have heard some talk about them, but as I am a new-comer in this section I am not well posted."

"I see them once in a while, and they have always treated me like gentlemen!" the rancher declared. "They take a sheep now and then or a beef, but they pay for them—they do not trouble a poor man, and when the authorities try to get after them, as they do sometimes, they get no information from any of the ranchers in the neighborhood, for we are not going to make trouble for the men who treat us well."

"That is natural enough!" Blake declared.

"Why should you betray them when they only take toll from the rich—from people who can afford to pay—who have plenty of gold?"

"Ah! wouldn't I like to join just such a band. That is the kind of life to exactly suit me!"

"I think that matter can be arranged easily enough. I can put you in the way of getting at them. I can direct you to a trail that will lead you somewhere near their haunt in the mountains and I don't doubt they will be glad to get a man like yourself."

"Well, if you do this for me I will not forget the favor."

"I will put you on the right road in the morning."

Blake spent the night with the rancher, and in the morning received the directions which would take him into the heart of the Sierra de San Pedro.

"So far so good!" Blake soliloquized, as, mounted on the burro he penetrated into the mountain wilderness. "Now then the success of my enterprise depends entirely upon the kind of men these brigands are. If they are a set of low-minded cut-throats, the very scum of the earth, I will only have my labor for my pains, but if the majority are a lot of devil-may-care fellows, who have dropped into an outlaw's life through laziness, drink or wild piece of folly I may be able to do something with them."

On he went, further and further up into the

mountain region—wilder and wilder grew the trail.

"I must be near the place," Blake murmured, as he noticed that he was now getting in among the pines, and his mentor warned him that amid the scrubby pines the outlaws had their lair.

Hardly had the words left his lips when a man made his appearance, starting up from behind a group of scrubby pines, and with a leveled revolver, cried:

"Halt, thar!"

Blake obeyed promptly, as almost anybody would have been apt to do under the circumstances.

The man was a big, muscular fellow, dressed roughly after the fashion of the region, big boots into which his pantaloons were tucked, flannel shirt, belt bristling with weapons, but he did not sport the usually worn broad-brimmed hat.

His head and face were covered with a sort of hood made of gray skin, with holes for the eyes and mouth, and at the top, little pieces of skin were attached to give the appearance of ears, but only by an extremely wide stretch of the imagination could any one conceive that the hood-mask bore any resemblance to a cat's head.

"Halt it is!" Blake replied, as he promptly checked the advance of the burro, which was easily done, for the animal would rather stand still than go on at any time, having evidently been born tired.

The masked man surveyed the sport for a moment, as if anxious to make out what kind of a man he was, for his appearance was a complete surprise to the sentinel.

The only travelers who ever used the mountain trail were hunters in search of game—and they did not average one a month—the brigands' spies with intelligence for them, or a detachment of armed men in search of the outlaws, but as these gentlemen always had timely warning of the approach of any expeditions designed to exterminate them, the armed men were never gratified with a sight of the game of which they were in search.

The brigand saw that the new-comer was a stranger; he did not look like a hunter, for he carried no rifle, and therefore he was perplexed.

"I say, stranger, ain't you kinder got lost?" he questioned.

"No, I reckon not."

"Whar are you bound?"

"To see the Gray Cats of San Pedro."

"The blazes you say!" cried the brigand. "Ain't you afeard of gittin' skinned? You'll find the Cats have mighty sharp teeth and claws!"

"I reckon all they can get by skinning me they can put in their eyes and then see clear!" Blake replied.

"I am a bu'sted sport, and as I don't know where my next meal is coming from, I thought I would try and see if I couldn't get a job with you brigands. I reckon the biz will suit me to a hair! I am just sick of the world, and I would like to get a chance to pay back some of the cracks which I have had to take, and that is the kind of man I am!"

The outlaw gave a loud whistle of astonishment.

CHAPTER XXI.

THREE OF A KIND.

"You are a fresh kind of a rooster, anyway!" the outlaw exclaimed.

Blake laughed in the hearty manner common to him when his sense of humor was aroused.

"I reckon, sir, you are about right. I must be somewhat fresh, since everybody seems to think I am. You are not the first man, my friend, nor the twentieth, to make that declaration."

"Is that so now?"

"It is the truth."

"Well, you have got a mighty fresh way about you, and no mistake. So you want to join the Gray Cats?"

"I do; I am clean broke, 'way down to the bedrock, and I don't know of any other way to raise the wind. I have been run out of about every town clear from Tombstone to the Mexican line, and the thing has happened so often that it is getting a little monotonous. The game of life for me is played, as far as getting a living in the mining-camps is concerned, and so I have come to throw myself into the bosom of your interesting association."

"Durn my skin!" the outlaw exclaimed in admiration, "if you don't reel it off jest like a preacher man, then I don't want a cent! Say, you ar' a talker, you ar'!"

"Well, I have always been credited with possessing the gift of the gab."

"You have got it, pard, and no mistake!" the sentinel declared.

"So you are bu'sted, and want to go in with our gang?"

"That is my lay-out!"

"Wa-al, stranger, you want to take plenty of time to consider about it, you know, 'cos when you once get in thar is no backing out," the brigand continued.

"Oh, yes, I understand that."

"It is mighty serious business, you know; 'tain't like j'ining a church!"

"No, I should say not."

"'Tain't all play either, for we have to take some awful hard knocks sometimes."

"Under the circumstances that is to be expected, but I reckon I have got so many hard knocks during the last few months, that I am seasoned to stand about anything; so you see I don't skeer worth a cent."

The outlaw listened for a moment, and Blake, listening also, detected the sound of footsteps.

"There is my relief coming," the sentinel remarked. "So I will be able to take you into the camp, but I will have to send word to the captain first."

"All right."

In a few moments a rather smallish man, dressed like a Mexican herdsman, made his appearance.

He, too, wore the gray-skin hood.

The moment he perceived Blake—owing to the rough nature of the ground, dotted as it was with giant boulders and clumps of scrubby pines, he did not catch sight of the sport until he was within ten feet of him—he clapped his hand to his revolver and came to an abrupt halt.

"It is all right!" the tall fellow exclaimed. "This hyer galoot wants to chip in and j'ine our band. Go tell the captain, and say that I reckon thar won't be no mistake made if we take him in."

"All right," said the other and his tone plainly betrayed he was a Mexican.

"He is a p'isoned little snake, that same Greaser," the tall outlaw remarked to the sport as the Mexican, retracing his steps, disappeared behind the pines.

"Yes, sir-ee, he's as ugly a sarpiut as ever drew the breath of life; Spanish Knife he is called, and if you j'ine our band you want to keep yer eyes skinned for him, for thar is nothing he likes better than to git a stranger into a fuss, and then rip inter him with his knife, so quick too that the man never has a chance to pull a gun on him."

"A nice, agreeable kind of a pard," Blake remarked in his careless way as though he took little interest in the matter.

"I thought I would jest gi'n you a hint, 'cos I have kinder taken a liking to you, you are sich a fresh rooster!"

"Much obliged! I will try to return the favor some time. But what makes you think the fellow will be apt to quarrel with me?"

"Wa-al, in the fu'st place he hates all Americans like p'ison, and I reckon if he had his way he would kill every North American, as he calls them, that he runs across, and then from the way he came to a stop when he see'd you and felt for his gun I got the notion that he had taken a dislike to you, right to one't," the outlaw explained.

"Yes, yes, I see."

"Thar war no need for him to pull his gun, you know, 'cos if he had any eyes he would have seen that you and me war talking together, right peaceably, and if everything wasn't squar' things wouldn't be that way, nobow."

"You are right; there was no occasion for him to exhibit any alarm."

"It is jest as I tell yer! he is a p'ison cuss and awfully quick to take dislikes. It is only an idee of mine, in course, but I have somehow got a notion that he will try to make it hot for you."

"Yes, but does your captain allow the members of his band to quarrel?"

"Why, durn it, old man, he can't stop that sort of thing, you know! All he tries to do is to see that every galoot gets a fair show. He is a leetle inclined to favor this Mexican cuss 'cos the Cap is a Greaser himself, and he thinks this leetle p'ison snake is one of the best men in the band," the outlaw explained. "He is ugly enuff, I will admit that, and awful quick to use his knife, but he generally tries to git some sort of a sneaking advantage."

"Such a man as that will bear watching," Blake observed. "I am glad you put me on my guard, for now I shall know how to take him."

"Darn my skin, if I understand how I came to do it!" cried the outlaw, abruptly. "Hyar I have been going and giving myself away, blabbing like a cussed old woman, and yet I never see'd you afore, and don't know you from a side of sole leather!"

"Well, the old thing will work that way you know once in a while," Blake observed with the air of a philosopher. "But don't you trouble yourself about my getting along with this fellow. Now that I know his little game, I will have my eyes open, and if he tries any nonsense with me I will be into him like a thousand of bricks!"

"Aha! now you are talking!"

"The seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent," that is Gospel, you know, and I reckon I can do the trick with this fellow as well as the sharps of old did!"

"You bet! I tell you what it is, sport, I reckon you kin take care of yourself, and I would be willing to put my money on you, every time!"

The return of the Mexican interrupted the conversation at this point.

"The captain will be ready in a moment," he

remarked, as he came up to where the two stood, and Blake was conscious that the brigand was taking a careful survey of his person; for he could see that his dark, evil eyes were fixed on him through the holes in the mask.

"Is the captain going to send word when he is ready?" the tall fellow asked.

"Yes, and the man to keep guard in my place, so I can be present when this stranger is introduced to our band, for I take a great interest in all Americans."

There was no mistaking that these words were uttered in sarcasm, and Blake, after his impulsive way, was quick enough to take it up.

"You are right so to do, señor," he exclaimed, with a polite bow. "I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, but I can see that you are a man of wisdom and discernment all the same. The Americans are the salt of the earth!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared the tall outlaw, "how is that Spanish knife? Them is your sentiments to a hair, hey?"

"I hate the accursed North Americans!" cried the other, fiercely. "And if I had my way I would quickly put my knife into every one I came across!"

"Oh, you would! Well, you are honest about the thing, anyway! And that is just the kind of a pard I like! Give me honesty every time!" Blake declared.

The approach of another masked man put an end to the conversation.

From the darker color of the new-comer's hands Blake jumped to the conclusion that he was a half-breed, a suspicion confirmed by the name the tall outlaw applied to him.

"Is the captain ready, Red Jose?" he asked.

"All ready."

"Come along, then, and brace yourself to be put through a course of sprouts!" the tall fellow warned.

"You will have need of all your courage, American!" the Mexican cried, in his ugly way. "And if your heart is not stout you had better not go, for any display of cowardice will be apt to cost you your life."

"If I show the white feather I will give you leave to carve me on the spot!" Blake replied. "You can bet your sweet life that I didn't come here to indulge in any foolishness!"

Again the tall fellow "haw-hawed!"

"You won't make nothing out of this rooster!" he declared.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE ORDEAL.

THE three proceeded along the trail, the tall outlaw in the advance, then Blake, while the Mexican brought up the rear, as though he had a suspicion that the stranger might attempt to back out, and he wished to be in readiness to prevent it.

Five minutes' walk brought the party to a little open spot—a sort of grassy knoll, surrounded by a heavy belt of pines on all sides, excepting where the trail came in, and a spot to the north where a wall of rock rose.

At the foot of the rock a spring gushed forth, and from the spring a brooklet wandered away.

This was the head-waters of one of the streams which, from the Sierra de San Pedro, flowed westerly into the river of the same name.

It was a picturesque spot, and one well suited to be the haunt of a band of outlaws.

Some rude huts had been erected amid the pines, and a little way from them was a corral built of slabs where the horses were kept.

Near the huts, lounging upon the grass, or standing in groups, were a dozen rough-looking, well-armed men, all with their faces hid by skin masks.

In the center of the largest group was a burly fellow wearing the Mexican costume, and from the richness of his attire—he was quite a dandy in his dress—as well as from the deference that the rest seemed to pay to him, the sport guessed that this was the outlaw chief.

The tall fellow conducted Blake to the spot where the big Mexican stood.

"This is the galoot who wants to j'ine our gang, captain!" he said.

Blake dismounted, and the burro, relieved of the burden of its rider, at once fell to cropping the grass.

"Aha! you desire to become one of the Gray Cats of San Pedro?" exclaimed the outlaw leader, in a harsh voice, studying the sport intently through the holes in his mask.

"That is why I came," Blake replied. "I am a bu'sted sport, and as I don't see any other opening for me I thought I would chip into your game."

"You need to be a man of courage to belong to our band, for we are a lot of devils!" the chief observed, grimly.

"Well, I reckon I have got a great deal of the devil in me!" the sport replied.

"How do we know that you are honest in this matter?" the brigand leader demanded, harshly. "What assurance have we that you are not a spy, who comes under pretense of joining us to betray the band?"

"I reckon I would be a fool to risk my life in that way," Blake rejoined. "Besides, who is

after you, anyway? You can see that I am not a Mexican, and you do not apprehend any danger from the Americans across the border; the Mexican troops are the only ones likely to attempt to make it warm for you."

This was the truth and Blake guessed from the expression in the eyes of the outlaw chief that he had scored a point.

"Then you are not a spy?" the brigand leader questioned.

"Nary time! I am just what I told you; a sport, flat broke—a man who has been run out of all the camps in the Tombstone district, clear from Tombstone to Los Mulos. There is no chance for a card-sharp like myself to make a living in the Mexican towns, and in talking with the rancher down on the Rio San Pedro, Juan Foredo, he advised me to join your band, and I reckon you will find me a useful man."

"Have you courage enough to stick to your comrades to the death?" the chief demanded.

"You bet! that is just the kind of man I am!" the sport replied, promptly.

"You just ask about me in any of the mining-camps—ask what sort of a galoot, Slippery Bill Davis is, anyway! I reckon you will be told that I am a tolerable good shot with either rifle or revolver, can handle a knife fairly well"—at this point the Mexican, Spanish Knife, bent forward and glared at the applicant, as though eager to test his skill—"and, take me for all and all, I reckon you have some men in your band who will not pan out as much gold to the turn as your humble servant to command."

It was plain from the expression in the eyes of the brigands that they were impressed by the speech.

"Well, I think we will give you a trial," the big Mexican remarked.

"Understand! the man who joins the Gray Cats of San Pedro must yield implicit obedience to all orders given by the chief of the band, he must be true to his comrades and willing to fight for them to the death."

"Of course, that is the usual lay-out in all games of this kind," the sport replied in his careless way.

"Would you obey an order to kill your dear-est friend if it were given you?"

"Cert! you can bet all your ducats on it!" Blake replied, promptly. "Just you say the word and I will stick a knife into any man here, to show you that I mean business. Take this galoot for instance," and he pointed to Spanish Knife. "Spit out the order and I will settle his hash at one clip!"

This unexpected speech took the brigands by surprise; the tall fellow roared with laughter, a proceeding in which he was joined by the rest, while the Mexican, in a rage, cursed the North American with remarkable fluency.

"You say you are a good shot?" the chief questioned, when peace was again restored.

"Pretty fair."

The chief cocked a revolver and handed it to Blake.

"See if you can put a bullet into a target on that pine yonder," and he pointed to a pine about fifty feet away. "Jack, put a skin on the tree."

The brigand thus addressed brought a small wolf-skin from one of the huts and hung it up against the tree by driving a knife through the upper part.

"I reckon it will take a good shot to hit that," Blake observed, as he leveled the revolver at the mark.

"Oh, no; hardly one of our band but would be able to hit it, eight times out of ten," the outlaw chief replied.

In truth, it was not a difficult shot, for the skin was about two feet long by three wide, and at the distance it would be mere child's play for such an expert marksman as Blake to hit it ninety-nine times out of a hundred, but it was not his game to allow the brigands to know what a magnificent shot he was.

He conceived that it was to his advantage to allow them to think he was only a passable marksman.

"I reckon you must have some pretty good shots, but here goes," Blake remarked.

Then he pretended to take careful aim, dwelling on it fully a minute before he fired.

Crack!

Sharply the revolver-shot rung out on the clear mountain air.

The brigand who had hung up the skin ran to examine and report.

"About a foot from the center," he exclaimed.

"If you expect to become a first class brigand you will have to improve in your marksmanship," the chief observed. "If you had been firing at a man, you would have missed him."

"Oh, no, it is a mighty sight easier to hit a man than a target like that!" the sport declared.

"Do you think so?" and from the peculiar light which shone in the dark eyes of the outlaw, Blake conjectured that this was no idle question, but put with a motive.

"Oh yes, no doubt about it at all, as I reckon you will see when it comes to the trial!"

"Perhaps so. Do you understand that you will be obliged to bind yourself by a fearful oath, when you join us, to be true to your com-

rades, to obey all orders given you by the chief, although one of them might be to kill the one nearest and dearest to you, and swear to slay with your own hand any one of the band who may turn traitor?"

"Of course, that is the regular thing," Blake answered without hesitation. "I never heard of an outlaw band yet that didn't run the game in that way."

The tone of levity in which the sport spoke did not please the chief.

"I am afraid you are not taking this matter as seriously as you ought!" he exclaimed, harshly. "I can tell you, American, it is no light matter. If I should point out to you now a member of the band and say he was a traitor, what would you do?"

"Ask you to stack him up against that tree where the skin is, so as to give me a chance to show you that I am a better shot at a living target than at a dead one!" Blake replied, promptly.

"We will take you at your word," cried the brigand chief, grimly.

"Bring out the prisoner and place him against the tree!"

A couple of the brigands hurried into one of the huts and brought out a rough-looking fellow, whose hands were tied.

"Mercy, captain, mercy!" he pleaded as soon as he made his appearance.

"Put him up against the tree!" the outlaw leader commanded, sternly. "We will show you the mercy which the Gray Cats of San Pedro grant to all traitors!"

The man did not speak again; evidently he was awed by the tone of his judge.

"Place him with his face to the tree," the chief commanded, as the brigands marched the fellow toward the pine.

Then he pantomimed to Blake to shoot the man as soon as he was in position.

The sport nodded, and took aim at the bound outlaw in the most careful manner, not betraying the least hesitation in regard to firing at this human target.

The outlaws nodded to each other, as if to express their satisfaction with the way the novice was standing the test.

After placing the bound man in front of the tree the two brigands made haste to get out of the way. They noticed that the sport was taking aim, and evidently they did not have much confidence in his skill, and were afraid that they might receive the bullet instead of the prisoner.

At any rate this was the way Blake interpreted their movement when they skipped away from the tree in such a lively fashion.

"Better get in among the pines if you don't want to get hit!" exclaimed Blake, using the old joke.

Then he fired.

With a groan of agony the brigand fell to the ground.

"Take your knife and finish him!" commanded the chief.

With astonishing speed the sport whipped out the ugly-looking bowie-blade and made a rush for the groaning man.

And the way that wounded, groaning man got on his feet and skipped in amid the pines, when he saw Blake coming, was so extremely laughable that one-half the brigands were compelled to throw themselves upon the ground and roll over in order to enjoy the fun.

But it was no joke to the chased man, for Blake ran him so closely that he was not ten paces ahead of the sport, when he took refuge in the hut from whence he had been brought, and a couple of the brigands got in front of the door, while two more laid hold of Burke.

"What are you about?" protested the sport. "Let me go! How can I carve him if you hold on to me?"

"Stay your hand!" cried the outlaw chief, who had not indulged in the laughter which had convulsed all the English-speaking portion of the band, for the fellow whom Blake pursued so hotly was a Mexican like himself, and one of his favorites, and he realized that the man had had a narrow escape.

"He is no traitor! It was a device to try you!"

"Oh, that is the how of it?" Blake exclaimed, sheathing his knife. "Well, I can just tell you that your man had as narrow an escape as he is very likely to have in his life. If my foot had not tripped over a tree root, just as I had my knife raised to strike, I would have dealt him a blow which would have cut his back-bone in twain!"

"You have passed the ordeal in the most satisfactory manner," the chief declared.

"Gather around, brothers, and we will administer the oath!"

The outlaws unsheathed their knives, and formed in a circle around Blake and their chief.

The oath was the "usual sort of thing," as Blake, in his contemptuous dislike for all this sort of mummary, would surely have remarked if he had said anything, but it was his game to keep quiet, and allow the brigands to suppose he was impressed with the ceremony.

When the oath was completed, the chief declared:

"Now, then, you are a brother, one of the Gray Cats of San Pedro, and can bid defiance to the law, for here, in our mountain retreat, we laugh all laws to scorn."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SKIRMISH.

BLAKE received the congratulations of his new comrades; the skin masks were removed, and the chief ordered a plentiful supply of mescal to be produced, and a general carouse was indulged in by the outlaws.

The sport now had a chance to see what the brigands were like.

There were fifteen men all told, fourteen present, and the sentinel on guard was the fifteenth man.

Six of the fifteen were Mexicans, or half-breeds, the rest Americans or Europeans, and they were far better men, apparently, than the others.

After taking a couple of rounds of drinks, the captain withdrew to his hut, which was the largest one of the group; he had been on a visit to one of the neighboring villages, and was tired after his ride.

The outlaw chief had been careful to restrict the quantity of liquor doled out, for he knew his men, and did not want them to become the prey of their appetites.

Although the amount assigned to each man was not enough to permit of their becoming intoxicated, yet Spanish Knife got sufficient to make him quarrelsome.

The man who had played the part of the traitor was his particular friend, and he was angered when he reflected upon what a ridiculous figure he had cut.

The tall fellow, who had, as sentinel, barred Blake's approach to the camp, and who was known as Sailor Bill, brought up the subject.

"I kin jest tell ye what it is, boys, I don't think I ever laughed so in my life, as I did to see Yellow Pete a-dodging round those trees and this hyer sport arter him, so keen, with the big toad-sticker!"

"Why, Pete, old man, you kin run almost as fast as a jack-rabbit."

"He can thank his heels for his life," Blake remarked, "for if I had got a good chance at him I would have made a hole that no doctor could have healed. If you are as good at fighting as you are at running, you must be a hummer!"

This raised a laugh at Yellow Pete's expense, and he exclaimed, sulkily.

"In regard to fighting, you had better try and find out!"

"Oh, you are brave enough, you American, in chasing an unarmed man with his hands tied!" Spanish Knife cried, before Blake could get a chance to speak. "But if you stood before a man with a knife in his hand, as well armed as yourself, the chances are that you will do the running!"

"Well, as to that, it is just as Yellow Pete says, you had better try and find out," Blake retorted.

"I may, and pretty soon too!" Spanish Knife cried.

"The sooner the better!" Blake answered. "You cannot chip into that game too quick to please me."

"Yellow Pete is a friend of mine I want you to understand!" the other declared with an ugly scowl.

"I want you to understand that I don't care two wags of a sheep's tail whether he is or not!" Blake exclaimed.

The outlaws began to look at each other; the thought was in their mind that if this discussion kept on it would end in a row.

"He is my friend!" Spanish Knife repeated, "and if you had hurt him during that chase do you know what I would have done?"

"No, nor I don't care either! What in blazes do you suppose you amount to, anyway?"

The brigands began to look serious; the Mexican had been known to attack a man for much less than this, but the new man, ignorant, of course, of the reputation of the bravo, was not disposed to knuckle.

"If you had injured my friend I would have cut your heart out!" hissed the Mexican between his clinched teeth, the expression of a fiend upon his yellow face, and, as he spoke, his hand sought the handle of his knife.

"You cut my heart out, you miserable little Mexican dog?" Blake cried. "Why, if you dared to draw your knife on me I would take it and break you in two!"

"American bound!" yelled Spanish Knife in a perfect fury of passion, springing to his feet, and drawing his knife.

Blake was on his feet equally as quick, his right hand in the breast of his shirt, the left in his coat pocket.

The Mexican rushed at him, then there was a bright flash of flame, followed by a sharp report and down went Spanish Knife headlong in the sward.

There was a momentary hush, for all felt that the brave was badly hurt, and then Yellow Pete rushed to avenge the death of his friend.

His knife glittered in the air, but before he

had taken three steps there was a movement of Blake's left hand, the skirt of the coat was slightly raised, and then a sharp report, although no one saw the sport draw a weapon.

The onward rush of Yellow Pete was checked; he threw up his hands, clutched at the air, and then went down, writhing in what was evidently his death agonies.

Spanish Knife had not moved since he fell, and all guessed that his wound had proved immediately fatal.

The brigands stared in awe; rude, reckless men were they, used to bloodshed and violent death in all its forms, but never had they seen the grim destroyer do his work with more rapidity than now.

The moment that Blake fired the second shot, which came from the revolver concealed in the left-hand pocket, than he shoved the derringer, which he had drawn from the bosom of his shirt—the weapon which had killed Spanish Knife—back in its place, and plucked out one of the revolvers from his belt.

The outlaw chief rushed forth from his hut. He had been roused from his slumber by the sound of the shots.

The brigand leader had anticipated there would be trouble between the two Mexicans and the stranger, and he came forth, expecting to find the sport weltering in his blood.

His amazement can better be imagined than described when he discovered that Blake was unharmed and both the Mexicans slain.

The heavy derringer ball had struck Spanish Knife exactly in the center of the forehead, so that death had immediately followed the wound, while the revolver's bullet had cut Yellow Pete's heart in twain.

"By all the saints in heaven!" the outlaw chief cried. This is a fearful piece of work! "You miserable American you have killed two of my best men!"

"Their blood is on their own heads!" the sport retorted. "And look ye, Chief of the Gray Cats of San Pedro, I want no insolence from you either, or I will send you to join your countryman in the flames below, you dirty Mexican dog!"

The outlaw chief was no man to stand such language as this, particularly from a novice who had just been admitted into his band.

"Wretch, you shall die!" he cried, fairly foaming at the mouth with rage.

He reached for his revolver, not aware that Blake had his already drawn, for after getting it out the sport was cunning enough to allow his hand to drop to his side, and by pointing the weapon backward it was concealed from view.

But the moment the outlaw chief made a motion to draw his pistol, up came the right hand—again the flash of flame and sharp report, and again the deadly bullet went straight to its mark.

The outlaw chief staggered forward—although stricken unto death, yet still he craved for the blood of his foe.

But before he got his revolver to the level, his strength failed him, and he sunk to the earth.

A few convulsive struggles and the soul of the outlaw fled.

The Gray Cats of San Pedro were without a leader!

CHAPTER XXIV.

BLAKE'S PROPOSAL.

ALL these startling events happened with such rapidity that the brigands were astounded—there was no time to reflect—before the brains could act the bloody work was done.

The new-comer—the cool and easy sport, had met the three desperadoes of the band—the men of whom all the rest were afraid, and killed them with as much ease as though they had been tame Indians, used to run at the cracking of a whip.

They stared at each, these rough, desperate outlaws, utterly confounded!

What manner of man was this who could achieve such an easy victory?

The thought quickly came to them that the sport had deceived them in the target practice, for they had noted that he had hit both Spanish Knife and the bandit captain in exactly the same place, and, apparently, had not even taken the trouble to draw a bead on his men, for all were snap-shots.

"Three Mexicans dead—three Mexicans left!" exclaimed the sharp as he fixed his piercing eyes upon the men to whom he referred.

The three happened to be standing in a group a little apart from the rest.

"You will want revenge, of course; that is only natural. I have killed your countrymen, and you should avenge their slaughter!" he continued.

"I am your man! I am always ready to face the music, and stand the racket!"

"Step off twenty or thirty paces, so we will have a fair field, and I will fight the three of you at once. Can I say fairer?"

"No, darn my skin if you can!" exclaimed Sailor Bill, unable to keep quiet. "I never heard a fairer proposal in my life!"

Nothing succeeds like success!

It is an old saying, and an extremely true one.

The English-speaking brigands had no tears to waste over their dead captain, and they had no idea of attempting to avenge his fate.

And the Mexicans, although they felt sore over the success of the American, yet, after what they had seen of his abilities in the fighting line, were not disposed to accept his bold challenge.

Mexico Jack voiced the opinion of the three.

"Oh, no, senor, we don't care to fight you; we are quite satisfied, and although the dead men were our countrymen, yet we do not propose to take up the quarrel; if they have been killed, no one was to blame but themselves," he said.

"That's solid chunks of wisdom in that, every time!" Sailor Bill declared. "Men ought not to monkey with a buzz-saw if they don't want to get hurt!"

"Are you all satisfied that the fight was a fair one, and I took no undue advantage?" Blake asked.

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried the outlaws, in a sort of chorus, and even the Mexicans joined in the affirmation.

"Well, that matter is settled then," and Blake put up his revolver.

"I am sorry that this little thing happened, but accidents will occur in the best regulated families."

"It is rather odd that a new recruit, like myself, should be the means of making such a hole in your band. I reckon that none of you expected anything of the kind when I made application to come into the game?"

The outlaws agreed that this statement was strictly correct.

"Well, it is such little things as these that make up life; but I say, boys, you will have to choose a new captain now."

"That's so!" Sailor Bill exclaimed: then the outlaws looked at each other and shook their heads as if they were in doubt as to the best course to pursue.

"You need a captain, of course; such a band as this cannot exist without a head and must have one."

This was sound sense, and the others nodded in token that they agreed to it.

"I suppose the best way to settle it will be to put the matter to vote," Blake suggested. "And in order to vote there must be candidates, and so I take great pleasure in proposing my esteemed friend here, Sailor Bill!"

"Nary time!" that party cried, almost before Blake could get his name out.

"No sir-ee, boss-fly! I don't want no captain's business in mine!" the outlaw protested. "I have not the head to lead a gang of this kind; I am not the man for the position, but you are!"

"Yes, yes!" cried half a dozen voices, the idea meeting with favor at once.

"Oh, no; I am only a new man!" Blake exclaimed. "You do not know anything about me—you don't know what I can do!"

"I reckon you have given us a pretty good notion of what you kin do in the fighting line," Sailor Bill remarked, with a glance at the dead brigands.

"Yes, but a brigand chief requires to be a man with a genius for command," Blake remarked. "He must be able to scheme and plan."

"I for one am willing to risk you!" Sailor Bill declared. "And as far as scheming and planning goes, Esparto—that's our late captain—wasn't no great hand at anything of that kind. He was a bull-headed fighter, and that is about all that kin be truly said of him. It was dumb luck more than anything else that carried him through. Now, you have got brains, and I am a-reckoning that you will make a tip-top captain."

"Well, boys, it is just as you say," Blake replied. "I ain't anxious for the job, but if you think I will fill the bill as well if not better than any of the rest of you, why I am not the man to hold back. I have always been noted for my promptness in chipping in when any game was going on in my neighborhood. But we will do the thing in regular order and put the matter to vote."

"That's the talk!" Sailor Bill exclaimed.

"Do the thing up brown."

"Anybody else nominated?"

The outlaws looked at each other inquiringly and then there was a general shaking of heads.

"I reckon, Mister Davis, that you are going to be unanimously elected," Sailor Bill remarked.

"All in favor of having a man about my size for captain of the band will please hold up your hands!" Blake exclaimed.

Every man put up a hand; the Mexicans a little slower than the others, still their hands went up.

"That settles it!" the sport declared. "I accept the position and henceforth will be your captain."

"Hooray for Captain Davis!" yelled Sailor Bill and the rest took up the cry.

"Gentlemen, you do me proud!" Blake remarked with a polite bow.

"And now the first thing to be done is to give decent burial to these men who were not as wise as they might be."

"I'll attend to that, captain," the tall fellow remarked.

"And when the job is finished we will hold a council, for I have a few ideas to submit to you," the new captain observed.

Then he seated himself upon a stump while the brigands gave to the earth the bodies of the men who had fallen in the fight.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SPORT TALKS SENSE.

WITH scant ceremony the dead outlaws were buried, and after the job was done Sailor Bill remarked:

"Thar! no decent man ought to complain of sich a planting as that, and if at any time anybody thinks thar ought to be some headstones put up I would recommend this for an inscription: 'They were good men but they didn't know the sport was loaded.'"

And the rest grinned at the ghastly joke.

Then they came and arranged themselves in a semicircle around the stump on which Blake sat.

"Now then, boys, while you have been attending to this little business I have been thinking out a plan of operations," he began.

Then he paused and cast his eyes around the half-circle, as if he was anxious for their attention.

All were listening.

"You are all strangers to me, and, of course, I don't know anything about your past lives, so 'tis not in me to tell how it is that you became brigands—outlaws—outcasts from the world, with every man's hand against you."

Blake spoke in an earnest way that went straight to the hearts of his hearers.

The address was a complete surprise, for they had not expected to hear anything like this from the light-hearted, devil-may-care sport.

"If I was going to make a guess as to how it was that you find yourself in such a position, I should judge you by myself," Blake continued.

"A long, hard run of bad luck! Every scheme you went into busted and left you worse off than when you began it; then, maybe, you took to liquor, got into a quarrel perhaps and used a knife or a pistol with the result of being obliged to fly for your life."

"That drove you up here into the mountains to herd with the wolves—in fact turned you into a human-wolf yourself."

Many a head nodded assent to this; the truth came straight home to them.

"I reckon, captain, that you must be kind of a fortune-teller, seeing that you hit us all pretty near to where we live!" Sailor Bill declared.

"Well, boys, I have seen a good deal of life in my time, and I reckon I know about as well how the old thing works as the next man," the sport declared.

"Now, after speaking of the past, let us take a look at the future, and I want to put the question to you straight, what future can any of us fellows who go to make up this brigand band expect?"

The outlaws looked uncomfortable; this plain speaking brought thoughts into their minds which were not pleasant.

Sailor Bill took upon himself to answer.

"Wa-al, captain, about all the most of us kin expect is to go the way them fellows went today," and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the new-made graves.

"That is it; you have hit it exactly, to my thinking!" Blake exclaimed. "Well, I put it to you, boys, if that is a pleasant outlook."

"I reckon not!" Sailor Bill answered, and the rest nodded to show that they agreed with the speaker.

"Look into the history of all these brigand bands from the time when brigands first became known!" Blake continued.

"I am not much of a scholar, but I know from what little I have read that although these outlaw bands may go on and prosper for awhile, yet in time they are always hunted down and exterminated. Now then, it seems to me that this is not a particularly pleasant prospect—not one to which we can look forward to with delight; all of us here are doomed to be cut off before our time, to die by the bullets of the men to whom is delegated the work of hunting us down, or, perhaps, to be captured, carried in fetters to some jail where for a time we will be made a show of, as if we were wild beasts, and then in the end to be choked to death by a rope."

There were anxious faces among the brigands now. Clearly, the life of the outlaw was not an agreeable one if this was a faithful picture.

"Well what do you think, boys?" Blake asked.

"The statement I have made is true, isn't it?"

"I reckon you ain't fur out of the way, captain," Sailor Bill remarked.

"I s'pose in the long run that 'most every band is broken up," another one of the outlaws admitted, "but then every man is not captured; some git off and are never captured."

"Very true; but they quit the brigand business, I reckon," Blake replied.

"You bet!" cried another outlaw.

"That agrees with my statement; when they quit the brigand business, some escape, but to those who keep in it there is but one fate—

death, either by steel, lead or the rope. You know, boys, I believe in looking these things right squarely in the face. I am no dull-headed fool, like your late captain, the Mexican. It is said of him that he used to boast that up here, in the Sierra de San Pedro, he was able to defy all the power of the Mexican Government."

"Yes, yes," some of the brigands exclaimed, "it is true!"

"And how did he work the trick?" Blake asked. "When the Mexican troops came after him did he show a bold front, give battle, and beat them back? Not a bit of it. He fled before the soldiers like a lot of frightened sheep before wolves; hid among the mountains until the troops grew tired of searching for him, and retreated."

"But, boys, you can't work that game all the time; it cannot go on for many years. After awhile the Government will become indignant because its efforts are set at naught, heavy rewards will be offered for the outlaws, alive or dead, and then some man, tempted by the gold, will either become a member of the band, or some rancher in the neighborhood, in whom you place trust, will turn traitor, and some fine morning the band will be surprised in its retreat, and cut to pieces."

"Captain, I reckon you are giving it to us straight, although the prospect ain't an agreeable one," Sailor Brown remarked, acting, as he usually did, as spokesman for the rest. "But I say, Cap, I have an idea that you ain't telling us this jest for the pleasure of hearing yourself talk. You have some scheme in your noddle maybe, that will make us solid."

"That is what I am coming to," the sport declared. "Most of you, I reckon, have got into this life just as I have—you could not help yourself; you had to live, and this was the only chance open to you."

Hardly a face in the group that did not give a glance of assent.

"But because a man gets into a net, that is no reason why he has got to stay there all his life, particularly when the prospect ahead is as discouraging as the one before us. It don't follow to my thinking, once a brigand always a brigand; once an outlaw, no end but death by steel, lead, or rope."

"No, not by a jugful! I see a way to avoid such a fate."

"Spit it out, captain!" Sailor Bill cried. "I reckon thar ain't one on us here who will not be glad to get onto it."

"The game is to concentrate all our efforts to secure some big hauls in a short time, enough so that when the money is divided, each man will have sufficient to enable him to make a fresh start in life, then let the band break up, each man start off on his own hook, and by so doing, it will be almost impossible for justice to get a hold on us, if we use common, ordinary precautions."

The brigands' faces plainly showed that this scheme met with their approval, and a look of relief was apparent on their features.

"Captain, I reckon you are 'bout right!" Sailor Bill declared. "Anyhow, what you have said suits me to death! I reckon I don't keer to stay all my life up amid these rocks, whether my time is to be long or short. If I could lay my fingers on a thousand or two dollars in cash you kin jest bet all the ducats you kin raise that I would dust out of here lively. The money would give me a good start and I know lots of places where I could go without fear of ever being troubled by the Mexicans or the ranchmen and miners of Arizona."

There was a general chorus of assent to this.

"My lay-out suits you then, and you all feel like chipping into this game?" Blake asked.

"Yes, yes!" the outlaws cried.

"All right; we will work this scheme. I have got my eyes on a big booty, which I think we can secure if we play our game right up to the hilt. I will commence to pull the wire right away," Blake announced. "And that reminds me: in my absence it will be necessary to have some one to represent me. Who acted as lieutenant under the Mexican?"

"Thar wasn't any; Esparto wanted to run the bull business himself," Sailor Bill replied.

"I must have a lieutenant; will you choose one by vote, boys, or shall I appoint one?" and as he put the question Blake's eyes rested on Sailor Bill, and this caused the majority of the outlaws to suspect that if the new captain was allowed to have a choice he would select the tall outlaw.

As he was recognized as one of the best men in the band, this was agreeable to the others, so one of the men suggested the name of Sailor Bill, and there was a general assent to the proposal, so the tall fellow was made lieutenant.

When this matter was settled, Blake remarked that he believed in not letting the grass grow under his feet, and that he and the new lieutenant would at once proceed to arrange for the move of which he had spoken.

This ended the council.

Blake and Sailor Bill retired to the hut where the brigand chief had his supplies.

In this hut the supplies were stored, and a sentinel always kept watch before the door to

prevent any one helping themselves without orders.

"Wa-al, captain, it strikes me that for quick work this little rifle is ahead of the deck," Sailor Bill remarked, when he and Blake were seated in the hut, secure from the observation or hearing of the rest.

"Yes, the business has gone forward with commendable rapidity," Blake assented. "Considering that I only made my appearance in the camp about an hour ago, I think it may be said that I arrived at the captaincy about as quickly as any man ever climbed to the honor."

"I reckon thar ain't no discount on that," the other asserted. "And the way you salivated those Mexicans was a caution to snakes!"

"I understood right from the beginning that it was either their lives or mine, and I am not quite ready to cash in my checks yet."

"You saved the hangman a job, for three bloodier-minded scoundrels than those Mexicans never breathed the breath of life. I don't pretend to be no saint, but I can say that I never wantonly attacked any man in my life, unless, of course, in the way of business when mixed up with a gang of this kind, and then I allers tried to avoid killing my man; but those three fellows craved blood; they were glad to kill any time, jest for the sake of killing."

"Yes, I know the breed; a more remorseless, bloodthirsty set of wretches don't live than these Mexican brigands. If I had not been sure that the fellows richly deserved death for a hundred crimes, I should have hesitated about killing them in cold blood as I did."

"Sny, captain, I may be wrong, but I have kinder got it inter my noddle that this hyer thing was all a cut-and-dried plan on your part," Sailor Bill exclaimed, abruptly. "I reckon you ain't near so fresh as you made out, and that the man who buys you for a fool will lose his pot!"

"I should not be surprised," Blake responded, dryly. "I was not flat enough to be tricked by the shallow Mexican. When he asked me to kill the traitor I knew it was all a game, and that there was no ball in the pistol. I made it lively for the fellow when I went for him with my knife, though," the sport remarked, with a grim smile.

And Sailor Bill laid back and howled, as the remembrance of the comical scene came back to him.

"I think I can trust you, Bill, so I will own up that I came here for the sole purpose of getting control of this band, but we will have no more Gray Cat business in the future, for it only serves to identify the men when a job is done. I need the services of some good men, for I am playing a big game, and if I win I can afford to come down right handsomely; but, win or lose, you will all do better than by playing brigand up in these mountains."

"We are with you," Sailor Bill declared.

Then Blake proceeded to explain certain plans which he wished to be carried out. The other listened attentively, and promised to see that the orders were carried out to the letter.

Two hours later, the sport, mounted on the burro, which, like a singed cat, was a great deal better than he looked, took the trail to the valley of the Rio San Pedro, feeling perfectly satisfied with the result of the expedition.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE HORSEMEN.

WHEN Blake got well down out of the Sierra de San Pedro, he did not keep straight on in the trail to the rancher's place in the valley, for as he rode through the foot-hills he came to where another trail branched off to the north and from the trend of the land it was evident that it led to the road which followed the course of the Rio San Pedro and by taking it he could cut across country and save several miles, and this afforded him an opportunity too to avoid the ranch of Juan Foredo.

He felt pretty certain that the rancher was a warm friend of the brigand captain whom he had slain, and he did not care to be exposed to unpleasant questionings.

He was not in the humor just then to kill any more Mexicans.

"Three Greasers in one day is game enough to satisfy any reasonable man," he muttered, as he rode along.

The trail he took was a short cut indeed for it shortened the distance some ten miles from that which he had covered in coming.

On he pushed up the valley of the Rio San Pedro, and the stout little burro did so well—in spite of the fact that he was about the laziest beast in the world if allowed to have his own way—that by the time that night came on he had reached the trail which led from the Rio San Pedro road to Slide Out.

After getting well into it the burro began to show signs of fatigue, and Blake whose intention it had been to push on and reach home that night, concluded to make camp where he was until morning.

He was provided with a poncho, as the rubber blanket with a hole in the center is called, an invaluable article to the western rancher. By sticking his head through the hole in the center it forms a cloak. If compelled to make camp, a

man snugly wrapped in the blanket can bid defiance to the weather.

Blake had reached the foot-hills of the Mulepass Mountains, the country was rough and full of brooklets running from mountain springs.

Turning aside a little from the trail, but not over a hundred feet, the sport found a fertile spot where there was plenty of grass for the burro, and a brooklet which would afford water for man and beast.

Like all prairie travelers, Blake had a supply of dried meat and hard-tack with him, so he was all right for supper.

He tethered the burro in a little valley amid the trees where the bunch grass was unusually thick, selected a snug nook in the center of a clump of pines fifty feet or so from the trail and spreading out his blanket prepared to make himself comfortable for the night.

It was nearly dark when he came to the conclusion to make a halt for the night, and when he finished his frugal meal the shades of night had covered in the earth.

The moon rose early, though—it was a full moon—and she came up from behind the peaks as red as fire.

Blake reclined amid the pines in a lazy way, watching the moon come up for a couple of hours, and then he went down to the brook to get a drink of water, and also to see if the burro was all right for the night.

The little animal had satisfied its hunger, and was now extended at full length upon its side, fast asleep.

Blake returned to his nook in the pines, rolled himself up in the leather blanket, snug for the night.

By this time the moon was well up, and all the surroundings were rendered by its rays almost as light as day.

Notwithstanding his long ride, Blake did not feel sleepy, and so he lay awake watching the fantastic play of the moonbeams upon the gurgling waters of a brook which meandered through the broken country on the other side of the trail.

As as he lay there in the wilderness, a perfect silence reigning, for there was not the faintest breeze to stir the stiff branches of the pines, thoughts of the beautiful Catalina came into his mind.

"Strange that I cannot decide who it is that her face reminds me of," he muttered. "It is not Isabel Escobedo, and yet there is a resemblance between the two."

"It will come to me some time, I suppose; it is not often that I am perplexed in this way, for I have a wonderful memory for faces."

And while he was pondering over this matter, the sound of horses' hoofs came to his ears, coming along the trail from the mining-camp.

In the wilds of the great West a man who is used to the country is always on the alert, for in such a region each new-comer is as likely to be an enemy as a friend.

Blake's position in the pines afforded him ample protection against discovery.

If he had selected his ground on purpose for an ambush, he could not have found a better position.

And as the horsemen came—there were two of them—he peered out from amid the branches of the pines, and, thanks to the strong light of the moon, was able to get a good view of the new-comers.

Blake recognized the men as soon as they were near enough for him to distinguish them.

Both were Red Dragon men; the one who rode nearest to the side of the trail where Blake was concealed, was a gross, fat fellow, Michael Barregan by name, usually called Fatty Barregan, who acted as a sort of overseer in the mine, but as he was an inveterate drinker, and seldom seen without being under the influence of liquor, it was a source of wonder to the camp that the Marquis de Belleville, noted for enforcing the strictest discipline, should retain such a worthless, drunken wretch in his employment.

Barregan was a man of fine education, and when not under the influence of liquor, conversed in such a way as to show that he had seen a great deal of life.

His companion was one of the numerous Escobedos, a rather undersized, but stockily-built fellow, with a dark, forbidding face, and his full, black beard gave him the appearance of being as ugly a ruffian as a man would be apt to run across in a day's travel in a cut-throat country. He was a fourth or fifth cousin of Isabel Escobedo, and being a natural-born horseman, had charge of the corral attached to the Red Dragon works.

"Well, where are those fellows bound, I wonder?" was Blake's mental observation after discovering who the two were. "I will bet a batful of ducats that no good purpose brings them down this way."

The two were riding along without exchanging words, each, apparently, busy with his own thoughts, until they came to a point directly opposite to where Blake lay in the clump of pines, then Escobedo—Black Dias, as he was generally called, pulled up his horse abruptly and said:

"I think I will stop here!"

"All right, anywhere you say; I don't think myself there is any use of your going clear down to the valley, though the marquis seemed to think it was necessary," and from the way the man spoke it was evident that he had been drinking freely.

"I suppose he thought there was danger you might lose your way in the hills, for the trail is a rough one," the other remarked.

"Why should he think I would be ass enough to lose a plain trail like this?" the other exclaimed indignantly.

"Because you have been drinking, and he was afraid that you were so muddled up that you wouldn't have sense enough to keep the trail!" Black Dias answered, blandly.

"Ah, bosh!" cried Barregan, "I have not been taking enough to hurt me! I have a head like iron, and can stand all the rum that can be got into me. The marquis knows it too, for he and I are old pals! I tell you what it is, Escobedo, I could relate some strange stories about the adventures that the marquis and I went through in the old world. If we have not seen life in all its forms, then no two men in this world have!" and the speaker chuckled.

"Well, if I were you, Barregan, I wouldn't say much about the marquis for if it comes to his ears he will not like it," the other continued.

"Do you s'pose I don't know that? I am no fool if I do drink a little liquor once in a while. But then I have to drink because there are some passages in my life which are devilish unpleasant to think about and when the remembrance of these things comes up in my mind if I didn't fill up with liquor I would never be able to stand it. It is a mystery to me how the marquis does, but then he has always had a heart of iron; I don't believe anything could trouble him."

"But I say, Escobedo, there is no use in beating about the bush, you know!" he cried, abruptly. "I understand all about this business; the marquis need not imagine that he is smart enough to pull any wool over my eyes, for he isn't. This game is to get rid of me because he is afraid that when I get full I will blow about him and his affairs, and mark you, Dias Escobedo, I could tell plenty of stories about this Maurice Marquis de Belleville, that would make people open their eyes if I chose to, but I am not one of that kind; I can be as silent as the grave—wild horses couldn't draw the secrets of my old pal from me."

"But he wants to get rid of me! He is a great man now, and wants to forget the many times I have helped him. I remind him of the old days, I suppose, when everything wasn't as rosy as it is now. It is all right!"

"I'm not complaining. If he can get along without old Fatty, well and good! I can get along without him."

"I will take his money and go my way, but he need not fear my blabbing! His secrets are safe with me."

"Let us dismount and I will count the money over to you on this rock, which will serve as a table."

"All right; that will do. Five hundred, ain't it?"

"Yes, five hundred!"

"That is the first payment! Bah! it ought to be five thousand. The secrets are worth that!"

And then, with considerably difficulty, he descended to the ground, for though the liquor had evidently not affected his head, yet he was extremely unsteady on his feet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FOUL DEED.

WITH both eyes and ears strained to the utmost, Blake watched from his covert amid the pines.

To his thinking it was a rare piece of luck that the pair should have selected a spot so near his ambush to transact their business.

Escobedo tied the horses to a scrub oak, near the stone of which he had spoken.

There was a big square rock with some smaller ones by its side.

While Escobedo tied the horses, Barregan took a seat on one of the stones and produced a flask, but to his disappointment there was barely a swallow of liquor left in it.

"That is always the way," he grumbled. "When a man wants a drink the worst way, he never is able to get it. Here, give me a drink out of your flask!" he exclaimed to Escobedo as he came up.

"Mine is empty; don't you remember that I gave you the last drop in it awhile ago on the road?"

"Ah, yes, but haven't you got another flask?"

"No! Do you take me for a walking saloon?"

"What are two little pint flasks of whisky for a man to carry?" exclaimed the other. "Bah! what is a miserable pint to a thirsty man?"

"Well, it isn't anything to you; that is sure. I believe you would get away with a gallon if you had it."

"Ah! don't I wish I had!" and the drunkard

smacked his lips as though he was enjoying the taste of the liquor.

"Now, then, to business," said Escobedo, taking a seat on the edge of the large stone.

"Yes, yes, to business; and when you get back to the camp I want you to tell the marquis that he need not be afraid to trust his old pal. There is no danger of my blabbing—not a bit. He has made the mistake that a great many people have made—they think because I drink that I am not to be trusted. There never was a greater error in the world. My legs may get drunk and my stomach go back on me, but my head is iron, Escobedo, and liquor never affects it."

"Look at me now!" he cried, abruptly. "How am I, drunk or sober?"

"Why you are drunk, of course!" the other exclaimed, impatiently. "I saw you when you got off your horse; you could hardly stand."

"You are right, old man, for a thousand dollars!" Barregan cried, with a chuckle. "But is my head drunk, eh? don't I know what I am talking about? Am I making an ass of myself?"

"Well, I must admit that you seem to be all right as far as that is concerned."

"Exactly, and I am about as drunk now as I ever get, but no one can play any games on me. Just you try to cheat me out of a single dollar in paying over the five hundred and see how quickly I will detect it!"

"I believe that is so."

"I know it is! I am just as smart a man as I ever was, although I am in soak about all the time! Tell the marquis from me not to worry; I will keep a still tongue in my head."

"He is afraid that I will speak of the past; but, old man, I couldn't do him half so much damage to blab of the past, as to reveal my suspicions in regard to the future, ha, ha, ha!" and the old man laughed hard and long, while Black Dias looked at him with a strange expression on his face.

"The marquis hasn't trusted his old pal with his plans, but I know the man so well that I have guessed them—I have guessed what he is up to—I have guessed the game he is going to play; it is a bold one, as is usual with him, and I would be willing to stake a big amount that he will win."

"Well, I hope so."

"Yes, of course you ought to hope so, you and all the Escobedos," and then the drunkard indulged in another fit of laughter.

"You are acting like a fool!" Black Dias exclaimed, in disgust. "I think the whisky has got into your head now!"

"Not a bit of it. I am only enjoying a joke, and you would enjoy it, too, if you knew what I—ha, ha, ha!"

Black Dias produced a buckskin bag, and as he did so, the jingle of coins was heard.

"Aha!" cried the old man, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "You have got the gold there, eh? The darling yellow boys that I love so well."

"There is no music in the world so sweet to my ears as the clink of gold."

"How about the gurgle of the liquor as it comes out of the bottle?"

"Very nice! very nice and agreeable, but not like the clink of the gold—for the gold buys the liquor, mind!"

"Yes, that is true," and as he spoke Escobedo emptied the gold from the bag onto the stone, but did it so carelessly that four of the pieces rolled from the stone to the ground.

"Pick them up, Barregan," said Escobedo, as he pushed the others to the center of the stone.

The old man bent over, one piece had rolled nearly to Black Dias's feet, and as Barregan stooped to pick it up, with a rapid movement Escobedo plucked out his knife and dealt the old drunkard a violent blow on the back, giving to the stroke all the force of his muscular arm.

So sudden and entirely unexpected was this action that it was as much as Blake could do to keep from uttering a cry of astonishment.

In all his experience he had never seen or heard of a more brutal and unprovoked a murder.

"The scoundrel has killed him so as to get away with the gold!" was Blake's thought, and a fierce delight took possession of the heart of the sport.

"You have killed the old man, you miserable hound of an Escobedo, bloody-minded ruffian that you are, fit type of the race of cut-throats from whom you came, but you will not get his gold for all that! You little thing, you scoundrel, Heaven ordained that I should witness the crime; and since Providence has willed it that way it is plainly evident that I am designed to punish the murderer," Blake muttered as he began to creep out of his blanket, moving as cautiously as a cat stealing upon her prey, and all the while keeping his eyes fixed upon the murderer.

The old man never even groaned after receiving the stroke, only uttered a loud gasp and fell forward on his face.

The murderer stood for a moment with uplifted knife after giving the blow.

He had withdrawn the steel from the body immediately after giving the stroke, evidently under the idea that a second stab might be needed, but the old man never stirred.

And the murderer glanced around him upon the silent moonlit hills as though he feared that there might be some witness to the bloody deed.

His eyes rested for a moment upon the clump of pines which hid the sport, and Blake, with his hand on one of his trusty revolvers, kept still, thinking perhaps that he in his endeavors to free himself of the *poncho* had made noise enough to attract the attention of the ruffian.

In case the latter did suspect his presence, the moment it was made manifest Blake was prepared to spring to his feet and "go" for him.

It was but the apprehension of a guilty conscience which made the red-handed slayer glance around.

As Shakespeare wrote, "the thief doth fear each bush an officer," and so Black Dias, with the stain of this new murder upon his soul, gazed around in apprehension, although he felt sure there was not a soul for miles.

Not even the wing of a night bird disturbed the solemn stillness of the wild and desolate scene.

And then in order to break the spell which had fallen upon him, case-hardened ruffian as he was, Black Dias cried aloud:

"There, you miserable drunkard, the marquis can be quite sure now that there isn't any danger of your betraying him!

"Your account with this world is closed and mine is the hand that did it.

"Now, I will scoop in the gold! That is good pay for one little knife-blow! Five hundred dollars. If I had got as much as that for every stab that I have given I should be a rich man!"

The ruffian began to replace the gold in the bag, by chance turning so as to bring his back toward the sport.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TAKEN AT A DISADVANTAGE.

THIS was an opportunity that Blake was quick to improve.

Black Dias, busy rattling the coins in the buckskin, the merry clink of the gold as welcome to his ears as the fallen drunkard had declared it was to his, heard not the stealthy approach of the sport, and the first indication he had of the presence of another mortal on the scene was conveyed in the stern command:

"Throw up your hands!"

He had just put the last gold piece in the bag, and with a convulsive motion he drew the string and clutched the bag, at the same time turning his head so as to look over his shoulder at the man who had sprung such a complete surprise upon him.

His consternation was great when he beheld the sport—the fire-eater, Blake, who had bullied the Marquis de Belleville in his own camp—standing within six feet of him with a cocked revolver leveled at his head.

Whatever wild idea of attempting to make a fight with the intruder which may have come to the brains of the desperado at the first moment of surprise, was immediately dismissed when Black Dias discovered who it was that had accosted him, for he, in common with all the town of Slide Out, had a healthy respect for the prowess of the sport.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" cried Blake, as the murderer kept his kneeling position and clutched the bag of gold.

"Drop that bag, get on your feet and throw up your hands instant or I will put a leaden pill where it will be apt to cure any mortal ill of yours."

The assassin did not dare to disobey the stern command.

There was a ring in the voice of the sport which satisfied the desperado that if he did not comply, his life would not be worth a minute's purchase.

He dropped the bag, rose slowly to his feet, turning so as to face the sport as he did so, and put up his hands.

Black Dias Escobedo was an ugly man when appearing at his best, but on the present occasion, with his features distorted by the conflicting emotions of rage, fear and hate, he looked like a very fiend.

"Now, you foul assassin, caught red-handed in the very act of murder, I will give you about five minutes to square your accounts with this world!" Blake declared. "By rights you ought not to have one. I ought to have shot you down like a dog—sent you to your reckoning with as little time for preparation as you gave your unfortunate victim!"

"I only obeyed orders," growled Black Dias, his lips beginning to pale, for he could see that the sport was terribly in earnest, and he could devise no way of escaping the doom with which he was threatened.

"Obeyed orders!" cried Blake, his brows contracted and his eyes flashing fire.

"Yes, that is the truth, so help me Heaven!" the man protested.

"Whose orders?"

The man hesitated; although in this position of peril he hesitated to speak; it was but for a moment, though, and then he blurted out:

"The marquis!"

"The Marquis de Belleville?" exclaimed Blake, sternly.

"Yes; I am one of the police, and when I was instructed by the marquis to take this old drunkard half-way on the road to the San Pedro Valley, pretend to pay him five hundred dollars, and then take the first opportunity to kill him, because, as alcalde of the town, the marquis had condemned him to death, I reckoned I must obey the order," Black Dias explained.

"The man must have been sentenced to death without a trial, for he had no suspicions that his end was so near."

"I suppose so," the other replied, sullenly. "I did not inquire about the matter. I thought that as one of the police, like a soldier, it was my duty to obey orders without inquiring into the why and wherefore."

"Yes, I reckon your conscience did not trouble you much," Blake exclaimed, contemptuously. "You were ready enough to obey the order to kill the old man, and I suppose you were told you could have the gold in payment of the service."

"Yes, that was it. It is worth something for a man to turn executioner, isn't it?"

"From what I have seen of you I should think that five dollars instead of five hundred would buy your services in that line any time," Blake exclaimed. "But about this yarn in regard to your being on the police; that is not so; you are in charge of the corral!"

"There were ten new men added to the police force yesterday, and I was one of them," Black Dias explained.

"Oh, if that so?"

"Yes; but I am betraying the marquis's secrets in telling you this, for it is his intention to keep the matter quiet."

"Humph!" exclaimed Blake, assuming an appearance of being uncertain how to act. "Now if I was sure that you were not lying to me about this matter—if you could prove in any way that you were acting as the agent of the Marquis de Belleville in putting this old man to death—"

The ruffian caught eagerly at the chance.

"You understand, of course, that in a case of this sort no written order would be given," he exclaimed.

"Hardly."

"Did you overhear the conversation between Barregan and myself?"

"Every word."

"Did you notice that he made threats of what he could tell, if he chose to speak, in regard to the past life of the marquis, and also that he had guessed what his schemes were for the future?"

"Ah, but that was only the idle boasting of a man with his brain muddled by liquor."

"Oh, no, his legs were drunk, but his head was all right," the other declared. "He knew what he was talking about. He has betrayed the secrets of the marquis and for that reason was doomed to die."

"Or more likely De Belleville feared he would betray him, and so ordered his death to prevent such a thing."

"As to that I don't know, but I swear to you I am telling the truth when I declare that I was ordered by the marquis to kill Barregan, and as a proof that I had done the deed I was instructed to bring back the buckskin bag with the five hundred dollars and a letter which I was instructed to take from the old man's pocket."

Stoop and see if there is a letter there! But don't try any funny business, you know, for upon the slightest indications of it I will bore you."

Black Dias thrust his hand into the best pocket of the rough coat the old man wore and fished out a letter.

"Is it sealed?"

"No."

"Open it and read; I reckon the moon will give you light enough."

The desperado complied with the command.

The letter contained a contract wherein the Marquis de Belleville bound himself to pay Michael Barregan the sum of two thousand dollars a year, in quarterly installments of five hundred dollars, for the term of twenty years.

"I really begin to believe that you were telling the truth when you said you had orders from the Marquis de Belleville to kill old Barregan."

"It is the truth!" Black Dias declared, stoutly. "How would I know anything about this letter else? Is there reason enough for the marquis to wish this old drunkard was settled so that there would not be any danger of his talking? Then again knowing that this man and De Belleville were on intimate terms do you suppose I would dare to run the risk of killing for so small a sum as five hundred dollars and run the risk of the marquis's vengeance?"

"Be reasonable, Senor Blake, and look at the matter in the true light. The marquis is to blame for the man's death. I but carried out my orders."

"What were your instructions in regard to the body?"

"To drag it from the trail and conceal it in some hollow. The thought was that the wolves would be apt to find and dispose of it."

"Can you write, Escobedo?"

"Do you take me for a dunce?"

"Have you a pencil?"

"Yes."

Write on the back of that letter that you killed Michael Barregan in obedience to orders issued to you by the Marquis de Belleville, and sign your name to it."

"It will be the same as though I signed my own death-warrant if the marquis should ever discover that I had done such a thing!" the ruffian exclaimed.

"It will be the same as signing your own death-warrant if you don't sign it, for I will kill you on the spot!" Blake declared.

Black Dias glared at the sport for a moment with eyes all aflame with rage, but was speedily cowed by the look which came from Blake's stern eyes.

"You will write or die!"

"Well, I will write," the brave replied.

"Make it brief, and to the point."

Black Dias wrote.

"Read it aloud!"

The other complied with the request.

"That will do; place it on the rock by the side of the gold."

Escobedo complied.

"But what will I say to the marquis when he finds that I have come back empty-handed?"

"Tell him you killed your man, and then was frightened away before you could secure the gold or the letter, by a traveler coming up the trail; it will be best, probably, for both of us to keep back the part that I was the traveler."

"Well, I suppose it will have to be that way, but he is sure to be enraged."

"I care as little for the marquis's anger, as I do for the marquis himself."

"Am I free to go?"

"Well, let me see; if I spare you, will you agree not to try to get at me for interfering in your little game here, and snatching away your five hundred ducats?"

"I swear it!" said the other, with uplifted hand, as though calling upon heaven to witness the oath.

"All right; it is a go. You are free to git as soon as you like."

And then in the most careless manner possible, considering the circumstances, Blake let down the hammer of his pistol, and proceeded to shove it in its holster.

And this was the opportunity for which Black Dias, with the eyes of a lynx, had been watching.

Hardly had the muzzle of Blake's revolver entered the holster, when Escobedo drew his with wonderful rapidity, attempting to cock it at the same time.

But before he could get to the level so as to fire, the sharp crack of Blake's self-cocking revolver rung out on the still night air.

A single gasp came from the throat of the desperado; he threw out his arms, and then fell forward on his face—dead!

The sport's bullet had cleft his heart in twain.

"And so dies another one of the accursed Escobedo line, and by my hand!" Blake exclaimed, as he looked upon the prostrate desperado.

"The Mexican idiot! If he had had any sense, he might have known that I laid a trap for him, but he hastened to tumble into it."

"After swearing that he would bear no malice if I gave him his life, he seized upon the first chance which presented itself to get the drop on me."

"And what was the result of this stupid piece of Mexican treachery? His death, and it lays at his own door, not at mine, although I am sure if he had not attempted to jump me, and gone away quietly, I should have been disappointed, for the scoundrel deserved to die, and yet I shrunk from killing him in cold blood."

"I reckon I am getting chicken-hearted! It does not do to waste any pity on these low-grade, cut-throat Mexicans."

"When you strike a real, genuine Mexican desperado, I believe for ugliness and devilry he beats the bravo of any other nation on the face of the earth."

"What secret of the Marquis de Belleville did this old man possess?"

"Ah, if he could speak!"

And then, as if in answer to Blake's invocation, a hollow groan came from the supposed dead man.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STORY OF THE PAST.

"HELLO! can it be possible that the old man is not dead?" Blake exclaimed, and then the sport hastened to the old man's side.

Barregan was lying on his face and Blake gently turned him over on his side.

The man was not dead.

He had been thrown into a state of coma by the shock produced by the terrible wound, but now was recovering from it.

Blake got out his whisky flask and poured about a spoonful through the clinched teeth of Barregan.

The potent liquor acted quickly, in relaxing the muscles of the jaws, then Blake succeeded in getting a good generous drink down his throat.

supporting the old man's head against his knee.

The sufferer began to breathe with less difficulty, then opened his eyes and looked up in the face bending over his own.

First there was only a vacant stare in Barregan's eyes, then little by little a look of sensibility appears.

"Blake!" he murmured; recognizing the sport.

"Yes, how do you feel?"

"I am done for—where is that Mexican scoundrel?"

"He lies yonder, dead!"

"Thank Heaven! Justice has overtaken him. Did you kill him?"

"Yes."

"The villain has ended me."

"Perhaps not! Let me examine your wound and see if I can't do something for it."

"No use! I am too old a bird not to know when my wings are cut. My hours of life are numbered. Hours! I should have said minutes; but, Heaven has ordered that I shall have strength enough to strike a blow at my enemy—not the Mexican—he is but a tool; it is this fiend of a marquis who has had me slain."

"You seem so strong that I think if you will let me bandage up your wound there might be a chance for you," the sport urged.

"No, no, I know better; not one chance in a million. This strength is false and due to the whisky."

Blake believed that this was the truth; he thought the man could not count on many minutes more, and if he had not been a tough, tenacious old fellow he never would have been able to speak after receiving such a terrible blow.

"All right, just as you say. I don't want to encourage you with false hopes for I saw the scoundrel strike you and it seemed to me as if he drove the knife in up to the hilt," and then the sport explained how it was that he came to witness the tragedy.

"I tell you the hand of Heaven was in it," the wounded man declared. "But I must hasten with my story before death cuts my thread of life in twain. It is the hand of fate which brought you here to witness this bloody deed. You are the only man that I have seen in all this region who is at all fitted to cope with this black-hearted villain who now calls himself the Marquis de Belleville."

"He is not a marquis then?"

"No more than I am."

"I supposed as much."

"His right name is Jean Valvert, or rather that is the name he bore when I first met him, and he always claimed that it was his right name. He is the son of a cobbler who mended shoes by day and robbed his neighbors by night, until the police got hold of him and sent him to the galleys."

"Jean, being a bright, good-looking boy, was brought up by a tradesman, whom he repaid by robbing him when he became old enough to run away."

"Then he was a soldier, an actor, and Heaven knows what else; finally he drifted to England, and there I met him, and we became partners in crime."

"Years passed on, and we flourished, for we were careful how we worked."

"Finally, about a year ago, as the Marquis de Belleville, with me as his confidential man of business, he came to Paris."

"We gave out the story that the marquis was a rich planter from San Domingo, a man of fabulous wealth."

"In Paris he met the Mexican woman, Isabel Escobedo. She was a wealthy widow, and the marquis plotted to make her a victim. She seemed to be fascinated with him, and after a short courtship they were married."

"It was the old story, diamond cut diamond. She had been rich, but nearly all her money was gone; she took the marquis thinking he was a pigeon, just as he had taken her to pluck."

"Then some of our swindling schemes came to light and we were obliged to fly."

"We came to this country and managed to get hold of the Red Dragon Mine, but the marquis needs every cent he can get out of it to get along as he had to go heavily in debt and bond the mine to raise money to develop it."

"Does Isabel Escobedo know that the marquis is a fraud and a rascal?"

"She knows that he is a rascal, but I do not believe she suspects that he is not a marquis. There are plenty of black sheep among the nobility, you know."

"True."

"There is no love lost between them, but they hang together because it is their interest so to do; but the marquis is getting tired of the woman, and I think he would like to get rid of her if he could. She is a Mexican, you know, and these Mexican women have unpleasant habits of using knives if they think they are wronged. I am satisfied the marquis is afraid of her, and one of these days he will take advantage of some opportunity to put her quietly out of the way."

"Murder her, do you mean?" Blake asked, and as he put the question the thought came to him that there was some justice in this world

after all, although mortals are apt to repine at the decrees of fate and conclude that the scales of fortune are not balanced with an even hand.

Isabel Escobedo was in a fair way to have placed to her lips the poisoned cup which she had forced upon others.

"Yes, that is exactly what I mean," the wounded man replied. He was beginning to sink a little, and was only kept up by doses of whisky, which the sport administered every now and then.

"The marquis, I think, suspected that I have penetrated his designs in regard to his wife, and that was the reason why he wanted to get me out of the way."

"Another was that since coming to this country I have become a hard drinker and he trembled lest some day when in my cups I should betray him, but the strongest reason of all was he was afraid I had discovered his scheme as to this girl, Catalina."

"Ah, yes, what of her?"

"She is a mystery; I don't think that Isabel has ever told the marquis the truth in regard to the girl. She is the heiress of an enormous fortune, but who she is, or where the money comes from, or where it is, no one but Isabel Escobedo knows."

"It is a mystery indeed," Blake observed thoughtfully. "But you spoke of the marquis having designs in regard to the girl."

"It is true, he has; I have known the man so long, and am so well acquainted with the way he works, that I am able to give a good guess from his movements of what he is up to."

"As I have told you he is not only tired of Isabel but afraid of her. If he was free—if she were dead—what is there to prevent him from marrying Catalina and so get possession of her fortune?"

"Nothing much," replied Blake in a thoughtful way. "The girl would be helpless in his power, and even if she could not be coaxed into marrying he would be certain to find some way to force her into a union."

"Yes, that is his game—he is a remorseless villain—the old man's voice was beginning to falter; the whisky was losing its power to stimulate him."

Nature, like a tired steed was about to lie down under the spur.

"You are the only man in this region who can check him," the sufferer gasped. "He is afraid of you—he is brave enough, but will not fight unless all the advantages are on his side."

"Save the girl—and—avenge me!"

It was only by a powerful effort that he was able to utter the last words.

His eyes closed—his breath came thick and hard.

Blake put the whisky flask to his lips.

Too late! the man was dead!

The sport gently laid his head upon the ground, then he rose to his feet and looked around.

His brain was busy with thought.

"Save the girl! yes, he would, for she was young and innocent and he took an interest in her although the ugly suspicion was in his mind that she had the blood of the hated colored race within her veins."

"Margaret, my wife, was an Escobedo too," he murmured putting his thought into words, "and she was a saint upon earth if ever there was one, and does she now look down, an angel bright, from that heaven to which surely her soul took flight when it was released from its earthly dwelling, and behold me steadfast as a sleuth-hound on the trail of the cruel fiend who so ruthlessly cut off her fair young life?"

And Blake looked as earnestly up at the broad vault of heaven with its countless stars as though he fancied he would behold the features of the lovely woman whom he had loved and lost.

The spell lasted but for a few minutes and then the sport turned his attention to earthly matters.

"Let me see! how did this thing come about?" he murmured.

"Black Dias stabbed the old man and then Barregan shot him dead, and the gold? Oh some passing traveler got away with that!"

So Blake fired one barrel of Barregan's revolver in the air and then put it by the side of the dead man.

"Now then I will give the burro until midnight to rest and then push on!" he muttered as he returned to his couch among the pines.

"Thanks to the knowledge I have gained this night I think I will be able to beat the French scoundrel at every point of the game!"

Ten minutes later and the sport was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXX.

A WILY SCHEME.

THE Marquis de Belleville and his wife sat in their private apartment.

It was just a week from the day on which the Fresh of Frisco had introduced himself to the Gray Cats of San Pedro.

During that time nothing of moment had occurred.

Blake and his partner had, apparently, been working diligently on their claim, never mak-

ing their appearance in the camp until after nightfall.

The conduct of both men had been such that no one could possibly find any fault with them, and, although the marquis had spies constantly watching the pair, yet his hope that the strangers might act so he would have some excuse to drive them out of the town, he saw was not likely to be gratified.

He was just speaking to his wife in regard to the matter when we introduce the pair to our readers' attention.

"The man is certainly conducting himself in a proper manner," the marquis observed.

"Yes, it is his game to behave in such a way as to throw us off our guard," Isabel replied. "But, cunning as he may be, he will not be able to deceive me. I know that his sole object here is to avenge himself upon me, and that, sooner or later, he will strike a terrible blow."

"Well, whether your suspicion be true or not, there is no doubt that this Blake is a dangerous man and his presence in the town will not be likely to benefit us in the least," De Belleville declared. "But as long as he conducts himself properly I cannot force him to depart."

"Yes, I understand that. There must be some excuse, of course; although you could use the bold hand of power, for you have force enough at your command to make the man depart, but it will not be wise to do so," the woman observed, thoughtfully.

"That is my idea. I ought not to force this Blake to leave the camp without being able to give a good reason for so doing, but there are more ways than one to kill a cat, as the old adage says, and if I cannot use open force, secret cunning is still left me."

"Very true, but you must plan with exceeding skill to be able to entrap this demon of a man!" Isabel exclaimed. "He is not only exceedingly cunning, but wonderfully lucky. So much so that he manages to escape dangers which would surely overwhelm ordinary men."

"These lucky men meet great falls sometimes," the marquis observed, with the air of a prophet. "The pitcher which goes often to the well, is sure to be broken at last, and Blake's good fortune will be certain to desert him at some critical moment when he stands most in need of it."

"Yes, it would seem so, but the man has always been so lucky that I am beginning to be superstitious in regard to him, and yet I am not the kind of woman apt to give way to anything of the kind."

"No, I should say not!" the marquis exclaimed. "You are about the last woman in the world whom I would take to be influenced by superstition."

"If you knew as much of the man as I do, I feel sure that you would believe that he was especially favored by fortune, too," Isabel replied.

"He is a dashing desperado, who does not seem to know what fear is, and often in this life headlong dash and sheer bravado succeeds wonderfully."

"Yes, but the man is lucky, too!" Isabel persisted. "Witness his appearance here in this camp; was it not a rare piece of luck his being able to rescue Catalina from the mountain lion, and so win the sympathy of the girl?"

"It seems so, and yet out of that incident I intend to make capital; I hope to arrange matters so that instead of being a benefit, it will be decidedly the reverse," De Belleville observed, with a crafty smile.

"During the past few days I have been working upon the feelings of our superintendent, Gomes. The young man is over head and ears in love with Catalina, and with the rash impulsiveness of youth has felt perfectly sure he could succeed in winning the girl."

"Bah! Catalina never gave him a thought!" Isabel declared. "That is, as a lover. He was a pleasant companion, and in this isolated spot the girl enjoyed his company, but I am sure that no idea of marrying him ever entered her head."

"Yes, of course; but it would be a difficult matter to make Francisco believe that," the marquis remarked.

"He fancies that he is quite a lady-killer, and because Catalina treated him well his overweening vanity made him think that the girl was in love with him. But during the past few days he has suddenly come to the conclusion that Catalina has changed in her manner toward him. In reality the girl has not altered in the least, but it is my hints and suggestions which have opened the young man's eyes to the fact that Catalina does not behave as a girl who is deeply in love with a young man should do. He has jumped to the conclusion that the girl has changed, and now having given time for the poison to work, I propose to suggest to Gomes a reason for Catalina's strange behavior."

"I understand," said Isabel, with an approving nod. "You have insinuated that if it had not been for the advent of this man, Blake, into the camp, there would not have been any change in the girl."

"Yes, that is the idea exactly."

"Well, I do not see any reason why it will

not work, but even if you succeed in getting Gomes to attack Blake, to my thinking, the chances are all in favor of the Cuban's being defeated."

"There comes in your superstition again," the marquis remarked, a little impatiently. "Do you think this man is such a warrior that it is impossible for any one to conquer him?"

"No, I do not go as far as that, yet to my mind this young Cuban is not the man to defeat such a fellow as this Blake," Isabel replied. "You must remember that I have the advantage of being well acquainted with the man, and so know exactly what he can do. He is a desperado of the worst kind—a man who does not seem to know the meaning of the word fear."

"I understand all that!" De Belleville exclaimed, with a slight trace of irritation. "I know the fellow is far superior to the common run of desperadoes, and I should hesitate to pit any ordinary man against him, but Francisco Gomes is no ordinary man. He is as brave as a lion, wonderfully muscular, and remarkably well-skilled in the use of all kinds of weapons, so I think he stands an excellent chance of conquering Blake."

"Well, it is a matter which cannot be decided upon in advance, of course, but one thing is certain; it will do no harm for Gomes to make the trial. If he kills Blake we will be rid of a dangerous foe, and if Blake kills him then we will not have to pay back the money which Gomes advanced to us to aid in developing the mine."

"Excellent! well-reasoned!" the marquis exclaimed. "You have arrived at the same conclusion to which I came long ago. By urging Gomes to attack Blake, we have everything to gain and nothing to lose."

And at this point De Belleville, happening to glance out of the window, caught sight of Gomes.

"There is Francisco now," he said. "And as there is nothing like striking when the iron is hot, I will have a talk with him at once."

Isabel expressed the opinion that this would be good policy and the marquis hastened from the room.

He found the young Cuban pacing up and down in front of the works, a decided scowl upon his face.

"What is the matter, Francisco?" De Belleville asked. "You seem out of sorts this morning."

"It is enough to make a saint swear!" the Cuban cried, abruptly. "Here I have been living in a fool's paradise, and never even dreamed of it until now."

"Ah, I see; Catalina is at the bottom of the mischief."

"Yes, I fancied I was sure of her love, and now I suddenly wake to the consciousness that it is not so."

"Oh, I think you are going a little too far," the marquis observed. "You must remember that Catalina is but little more than a child; a young girl at her age rarely knows her own mind, and if you will only have patience, I do not doubt but that everything will come all right in time."

"No, no, I do not think so!" Gomes exclaimed. "The few chance words which you let fall the other day, have opened my eyes. I have been blind, but I am no longer. It is the advent of this man, Blake, which has changed Catalina. Fortune gave him the chance to save her from the mountain lion, and that has made him a hero in her eyes."

"I can hardly believe it," De Belleville observed, with a doubtful shake of the head. "That is, I mean that she cannot have fallen in love with this stranger. Of course, it is only natural that she should be grateful to him for saving her life, but I am loth to believe that there can be any stronger feeling, for she knows that I do not think the man is of good character, although I must admit that he has behaved himself since coming to the camp."

"Oh, there isn't any doubt that he is a card-sharp of the first water," the Cuban exclaimed. "He has behaved himself because he has been warned that he would not be permitted to remain in the camp if he did not. Then, too, it is more than probable that the rascal sees that, thanks to the mountain lion incident, he has made an impression upon the girl, and he has wit enough to understand that she is a prize well worth winning, and so he is on his good behavior. It is my intention to speak a few plain words to Catalina on the subject."

"There she is," the marquis said, catching sight of the girl, far up in the foot-hills.

"Good! I will improve the opportunity."

And the Cuban hastened toward the maid, the marquis watching him with a sardonic smile.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE INTERVIEW.

CATALINA had been for a walk, and carried a bunch of gay wild flowers, which she had gathered in her excursion.

She was fully half a mile away when the marquis called Gomes's attention to her, and so the Cuban was able to meet her at a point where

they could converse without danger of their words being overheard.

Catalina had halted before Gomes reached her, and seating herself upon a rock, was busy in arranging her bouquet.

She greeted the Cuban with a pleasant smile as he approached, and, holding the flowers up for his inspection, said:

"What do you think of my spoils?"

"They are very pretty, but not nearly as attractive as their owner," the Cuban replied, gallantly.

"Ah, you are a sad flatterer!" Catalina declared.

"Oh, no, it is the truth, I assure you!" he protested.

And seating himself upon a rock, a yard or so from the girl, he continued:

"Catalina, I want to talk to you upon a serious subject."

The girl opened her eyes in astonishment; the tone in which the young man spoke, and the peculiar look upon his dark, handsome face showed her that he was very much in earnest.

She glanced around her in a sort of half-frightened way, as though she was seeking some avenue of escape, for she had a presentiment that the interview would be an unpleasant one, and then, suddenly realizing that this was absurd, with an effort, she composed herself and said:

"What do you wish to say?"

The question was not an idle one, for Catalina had never looked upon the young man in the light of a lover, and so had no suspicion that she was about to listen to an avowal.

She saw that he was agitated, and had a fear she was about to hear something unpleasant, but had no notion as to the nature of the disclosure.

"Catalina, I presume you have some idea of what I am about to say," Gomes began.

Again the dark eyes of the girl opened wide in astonishment.

"No, I haven't any idea at all," she replied.

"Is it possible that you have been blind to the fact that I have been madly in love with you from the time that I first met you?" Gomes exclaimed, hurriedly, his voice full of passion.

A burning blush came rapidly over the dark face of the girl, and she cast her eyes upon the ground.

The unexpected avowal filled her with confusion.

"Yes, from the moment that my eyes first rested upon your face I became satisfied that you were the only woman in this world who could ever make me happy," the superintendent continued. "And I have earnestly striven to win your love by all the means in my power. You are the first, the only woman I have ever fancied, and if you should bless me with the priceless treasure of your love, I should be so elated with my good fortune that I would not change places with any king on earth."

Gomes spoke with all the heat of a youthful lover.

Catalina was sorely troubled, for she sincerely liked the young man, but only as a friend; under no circumstances could she be brought to look upon him in the light of a husband.

It was a disagreeable task which she had before her, and she nerved herself to meet the ordeal.

"I am deeply sensible of the honor which you do me, and regret exceedingly that I am not able to give a favorable answer to your proposal," Catalina replied, slowly.

"You cannot be my wife, then?"

"No, it is impossible. I suppose I have been very blind and foolish, but I never thought of you but as a friend—one whom I esteemed highly, and whose friendship I should be sorry to lose."

"Then you reject my suit?" Gomes asked, quietly, but with an ominous glitter in his dark eyes.

"Yes; I am sorry that I am not able to give you a favorable answer, but in such a case I hold that it would be a sin not to speak the truth," Catalina answered, firmly. "But it is as I have told you. I have never thought of you in any other guise than that of a friend, and your avowal to-day is a complete surprise to me."

"Perhaps I have been too hasty!" the Cuban exclaimed. "But then I had no idea that you were not aware that I adored you to distraction—that ever since we met I have been your devoted slave, basking in the light of your smile as the flowers delight in the sun's rays, and now, at one fell stroke, to be hurled from Paradise to earth it is a woeful shock. Possibly, though, in time, you may relent—you may be induced to look with a favorable eye upon my suit," he said, persuasively.

"No, I feel that I shall never be able to regard you in any other light than that of a friend," the girl replied.

"Have I a rival then who has succeeded in winning your affections?" Gomes asked, a dark look upon his face.

Catalina flushed to her temples, and this the Cuban interpreted to mean that his surmise was correct, but in this he was wrong for the girl blushed because she was offended by the question.

"It is the truth then!" he exclaimed before

Catalina could speak. "You reject me because you have given your love to another man, and I feel sure I can name the fellow, who is utterly unworthy of so rich a gift."

Catalina sprang to her feet, her face all aflame.

"Mr Gomes you must not speak in such a way to me; I cannot permit it!" she exclaimed.

"It is my duty as an honest man to speak!" he retorted. "I cannot remain silent and see you throw yourself away upon this miserable adventurer, who, beyond a doubt, has been warned out of more camps than he has fingers and toes."

Catalina gazed at the Cuban in astonishment, for she was at a loss to guess who he meant.

"I do not understand you, sir, and I must protest against the tone in which you speak!" she exclaimed.

"The man who gives good advice is rarely thanked for it," Gomes retorted with bitter accent. "And therefore it is not strange that you do not relish my plain speaking. But I consider that it is my duty to warn you against this scoundrel who has evidently made such an impression upon you that you do not care to listen to my suit. But I warn you, Catalina, you are being deceived in the grossest way. This fellow is nothing but a common black-leg—a gambler of the worst type, although he has not dared to show himself in his true colors since coming to this camp, for he understands well enough that his stay here would be short if he attempted to follow the career of crime by means of which he usually lives. Now he is masquerading as an honest miner, and I have no doubt he finds the role an extremely unpleasant one, for a scoundrel of his class is only happy when he is plundering victims!"

Catalina was utterly amazed at this violent speech.

"You are speaking in riddles!" she exclaimed, "and I am utterly at a loss to comprehend your meaning!"

"Why do you wish to pretend ignorance?" Gomes demanded, sternly. "Do you think that I am blind? Do you think I have not noticed how your behavior toward me has changed since this rascal Blake made his appearance in the camp?"

"Blake!" gasped Catalina, astounded by the accusation.

"Yes, Blake!" Gomes retorted. "He is the man who has supplanted me in your affection, for although you may deny it, yet I know you looked with a favorable eye upon me until he came."

"No, no!" Catalina cried. "That is not the truth! You have misunderstood me and deceived yourself. I did not for a moment imagine that you wished to gain my love. I thought only of you in the light of a dear friend, and as to this stranger, Mr. Blake, the idea that he is my lover is absurd. He saved my life, and therefore has a claim upon my gratitude, but he has never sought my society, and the idea that there is any love affair between us is absurd in the extreme."

"Have you not frequently encountered him during your rambles in the foot-hills?" the superintendent demanded, sharply.

This was the truth; Blake, with his prospecting tools, had made a careful examination of the surrounding country, hoping to find a "lead," and during these excursions had chanced to encounter the girl, and she, on her return to the camp, mentioned the circumstance to either the marquis or Isabel, and De Belleville, in a careless way, had communicated the fact to Gomes, taking care to word his speech in such a manner that the impulsive Cuban jumped to the conclusion that these chance meetings were regularly arranged interviews.

Again Catalina flushed scarlet, and this time there was a sparkle in her eyes which showed that her temper was aroused.

"Is it possible that you have stooped so low as to play the spy upon me, Mr. Gomes?" she exclaimed. "But it is the truth, and I will not deny that I have met Mr. Blake three or four times. That is my business, though, and I am not accountable to you for my actions. I must request, however, that you will cease to trouble yourself about me in the future, for I assure you that I am perfectly able to take care of myself."

And then, with a salutation which would have done credit to a tragedy queen, the girl departed, leaving the Cuban mad with rage.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GOMES'S RESOLVE.

FROM a convenient window in his house De Belleville had watched the progress of the interview by means of a powerful field-glass, and from the movements of the two was able to make a shrewd guess as to what was being said, and when he saw Catalina depart, offended dignity written in her every movement, he laughed sardonically.

"Aha! my dear young friend, Gomes, has put his foot in it, as I expected! He has offended Catalina and she departs in a fine state of indignation."

"Now then, when the superintendent returns I fancy he will be in a good state of mind to

take advantage of a few hints which I shall drop."

Then, after satisfying himself that the interview was ended, for Gomes did not attempt to pursue the girl, but came leisurely on behind her, the marquis sallied forth.

He proceeded to the works and entered the office; this was for the purpose of avoiding the girl, for he did not care to meet her; after she passed and entered the house he came out.

"From Catalina's flushed face and excited appearance I conclude the interview was a stormy one," the marquis remarked with a chuckle.

And when Gomes came along the angry look upon his dark face confirmed De Belleville in his opinion.

"I judge from the look upon Catalina's face, as well as from the expression upon your own, that the interview between you and Catalina has not been a pleasant one," the marquis remarked as he came out of the office and encountered the superintendent.

"You are right; it was not!" and then Gomes related the particulars.

"She was angered by your interference," De Belleville remarked in a reflective way.

"Yes; and to my thinking there is no doubt that she is infatuated by this scoundrel."

"It is very unfortunate!" the marquis declared. "In such a case, too, remonstrances are usually thrown away. Young girls will be heedless and headstrong, and I have no doubt if I forbade her to have anything more to do with this fellow it would be the most likely way to make her fly to him."

"Yes, it is very probable," Gomes remarked with a gloomy brow. "I can tell you, marquis, it is the heaviest blow which has ever fallen upon me for I had set my heart upon winning Catalina."

"Yes, yes, I can understand that, and I can assure you, Francisco, there isn't a man in the world to whom I would sooner give Catalina, and it grieves me exceedingly to think that there is the slightest danger of her throwing herself away upon such a common scoundrel as this Blake. I wish the fellow had never made his appearance in the camp; had it not been for his coming, and the romantic manner in which he made Catalina's acquaintance, I feel sure that in time she would have been perfectly willing to become your wife."

"Marquis, I come of a race the men of which do not tamely submit to be robbed of the love of the woman upon whom they have set their heart!" the young man declared with true Spanish fire.

"Yes, I am aware of that; men of your nature seldom submit to be wronged."

"And in this case I do not intend to submit!" Gomes cried with all the arrogance of the old Spanish race from which he sprung.

"This miserable wretch of a gambler has come between me and the woman of my heart and I intend to call him to an account. The prize is a rich one and he shall not carry it away without a struggle."

"My dear Gomes, do not do anything rash!"

"Don't be alarmed, I shall be able to give a good account of myself in any trouble with such a scoundrel as this black-leg!"

"Do not make the mistake of holding him too cheaply," De Belleville warned. "According to accounts he is a dangerous man."

"Oh, that is always the cry in regard to all these wandering card-sharps!" the Cuban exclaimed, contemptuously. "They always contrive to promulgate the report that they are terrible fellows, so as to keep their victims from attacking them after the robbery is over. The reputation of being a 'bad man' is part of their stock in trade, but I have not the least fear in regard to holding my own in any contest in which I may engage with such a man as this Blake as my opponent."

"I am aware that you are an expert with all kinds of weapons, and it seems to me as if the odds are in your favor, if you have a fight with this desperado; still, I presume he is a good man, for there is usually some truth in such reports as are current in regard to him, and as I said before, do not make the mistake of underrating him."

"In a matter of this kind it is always wise to believe your opponent is better than he really is rather than worse, then a man will not be apt to be unpleasantly surprised."

"That is true and I will bear your warning in mind," the Cuban replied.

"The man who expects to find his opponent a giant and then discovers that he is only an ordinary man, is not apt to be so disagreeably surprised as he that picks a quarrel with a dwarf and then suddenly finds him developing into a giant."

"Of course; as the French declare, that goes without saying," Gomes answered. "You need not be afraid but what I shall take proper precautions. I shall proceed about the business as though I believed this wretch of a gambler to be one of the greatest fighting men in the world."

But, despite this assurance, the curl of contempt which appeared on the face of the Cuban showed plainly that his opinion of the sport was an extremely poor one.

He had the old-time notions that blood will tell, and that a gentleman like himself could not fail in a tug-of-war to triumph over a common man.

"When do you propose to proceed in this matter?" the marquis asked.

"As soon as possible! I do not intend to allow the grass to grow under my feet. I am in a fever of impatience to meet this scoundrel!"

"Be careful; do not allow your anger to cause you to be imprudent," De Belleville warned.

"Oh, have no fear on that score. When the time for action comes I shall be perfect master of myself."

"Let me see," murmured the marquis, reflectively, "you will not be able to see Blake until night unless you go to his mine, and to my thinking it would not be wise to do that."

"Hardly, but I am in such a fever of impatience that I do not feel like waiting until night to call this fellow to an account. How would it do to send a message to his mine that I desire to speak to him upon an important business matter?"

"That would do; there are no objections to that plan as far as I can see," De Belleville remarked, and then, just as the words left his lips, he caught sight of the figure of a man following the trail which wound around amid the foot-hills on the other side of the river.

"Aha!" he cried, "there is your game now. There will be no need to send a message, for there is Blake on his way to the town; by going up the trail you will be able to meet him."

"Yes, yes, I will improve the opportunity!" (to nos cried.

"Are you armed and ready for a fight?" the marquis inquired. "For if you attempt to question the fellow about the girl he may resent it, and so you may be immediately drawn into a quarrel."

"I am always prepared. I make it a rule to examine my revolvers and see that they are in working order every morning. I have become a thorough American and am always as ready for a fight as the greatest scoundrel in the camp."

"Well, be on your guard; be sure that the rascal does not take you by surprise and good luck go with you!"

"Thanks!" And then the Cuban started up the trail, so as to meet Blake when he turned from the small trail into the large one.

De Belleville watched him for a few moments, a sinister smile upon his face.

"So far the game goes exactly as I wished," he muttered. "Gomes will encounter the sport up in the wilderness of the foot-hills where no eye will witness the meeting. The Cuban is young and hot-headed; just now his blood is in a flame and he will not be apt to be careful in regard to how he speaks—he will not pick and choose his words. Blake is inclined to be quick-tempered too, and if he is rudely accosted by the superintendent the chances are a thousand to one that he will reply in kind, then, if hot words bring on a fight, a duel under such circumstances, with no witnesses, will be apt to make the visitor look extremely like a murderer, and if Blake is the victor, and I suppose the chances are decidedly in his favor, will I not be able to make the camp too hot to hold him?"

The marquis meditated over this question for a moment and then he shook his head in a decided manner.

"Yes, yes, most certainly if he killed the superintendent, and there is no witness to the fight, it will be strange indeed if I cannot run him out of the camp."

"If Gomes is lucky enough to kill him, why that settles the matter too. So, as far as I can see, the sport is in a trap from which he will not be able to escape."

"Now, then, my game is to have some men ready so as to be on hand when the fight is ended."

And the marquis proceeded to the mine.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ENCOUNTER.

GOMES went up the trail at a rapid rate. His blood was in a flame and he was eager to come face to face with the man who had stolen from him the affection of the peerless Catalina.

In his mind there was no doubt in regard to the truth of this, so strong was the impression that the artful words of the marquis had made upon him.

"He shall give her up, the miserable scoundrel!" he cried, talking aloud to himself and gesticulating violently as soon as he got well out of the camp.

"He shall give her up or I will kill him without showing more mercy than I would to a mad-dog, the accursed rascal!"

He went on at such a pace that he was within a hundred feet of the point where the foot-hills trail joined the main road when Blake turned from the one into the other.

The sport was too old a man of the world not to suspect that the superintendent meant mischief when he beheld him striding up the trail at so furious a rate.

But as Gomes had both his hands empty, the

sport did not trouble himself to search for a weapon, being satisfied that he could "pull" as quickly as the other if war was declared.

Blake, as he approached the superintendent, nodded in the most friendly manner, just as if he had no suspicions that Gomes meditated mischief.

"You are just the man I want to see!" the Cuban declared, coming to a halt in the middle of the trail when within a few yards of Blake.

"Well, I am just the man who can be seen," the sport replied.

"I have a few earnest words to say to you."

"All right; I am ready to hear them."

"In the first place I want you to understand that I know the little game you are up to!" and the Cuban shook his finger impressively in the face of the sport.

Now Blake was not a man who often permitted himself to be astonished, but he was, most decidedly, by this announcement.

His idea, of course, was that the other referred to the mission of vengeance which had brought him to Slide Out City, and he was sorely puzzled that the Cuban should know anything about the matter.

His quick wits soon discovered a solution to the mystery though.

He knew that Isabel Escobedo suspected him, and he jumped to the conclusion that she had set the Cuban on, hoping to surprise him into an avowal.

In his sleeve he laughed at the idea though, and mentally came to the opinion that the wary Isabel was making a big blunder if she imagined he could be caught by any such shallow trick.

"You know my game, eh?" Blake exclaimed, with a light laugh. "Well, upon my word, I don't think I have made any secret of it. My game is the same as that of every one else in this region; to make all the money I can, and as quickly as possible, and then go off and enjoy it somewhere else."

The Cuban scowled.

"This is but a mere, paltry evasion!" Gomes declared. "You know very well that the game to which I refer is not one of money-getting."

"Oh, isn't it?" and Blake affected to be amazed. "I reckon, Mr. Gomes, that you have got the best of me."

"This pretended ignorance will not serve you, for I understand what you are about fully as well as you do yourself!" the superintendent declared.

"That is a pretty strong announcement, and I hope you will excuse me if I remark that I doubt it. It strikes me that you have made some mistake about this matter."

"Oh, no, no mistake at all!" Gomes retorted. "I had a conversation to-day with the lady, not half an hour ago, and that conversation fully opened my eyes in regard to the game that you are trying to play, and I tell you now, right to your teeth, that you do not stand any chance at all."

"It may be that the lady believes she knows my game, but it doesn't follow that she does. The wisest people make mistakes sometimes," Blake rejoined.

"Oh, I have not said that she knows your game, for if she suspected it, she would be on her guard at once and then you would stand no chance of succeeding. You are coolly calculating on her innocence—on her want of knowledge of the world to aid you in your scheme."

Now Blake was really astonished, for he thought the superintendent spoke of Isabel Escobedo, and in his amazement he exclaimed:

"My friend, you are away off! With all due respect to the lady, no one who is acquainted with her will ever make the mistake of thinking that she is not well-posted. She is no chicken, and I reckon that what she does not know is not worth knowing."

It was now Gomes's turn to be astonished, and he looked at Blake as though he thought that he had taken leave of his senses.

"Are you crazy to speak in this way of the woman whose love you have been striving to gain?" Gomes exclaimed.

"Oh, come now, you are decidedly off your base!" the sport exclaimed. "What the deuce do you mean by an accusation of that kind? It is absolutely ridiculous!"

"Ah, I perceive you believe that your secret meetings with her in the foot-hills are not known, but Catalina, in her innocence, did not think there was any harm in speaking about the matter."

At the mention of the young girl's name a light suddenly flashed upon the sport, and he could not forbear from laughing heartily at the blunder which he had made.

"I do not see anything in the matter to laugh at!" the superintendent exclaimed, indignantly.

"No, of course not, but when an odd idea crosses my mind, as one did just now, I can not help laughing," Blake explained.

"So, you are interesting yourself on behalf of Miss Catalina? and I judge from your remarks that you are laboring under the impression that I have been making love to the girl."

"Yes, and it is your game to entrap her into a marriage, but I warn you that the affair must not go any further!"

Blake's brows contracted a little as he listened to the positive words of the Cuban, but he kept his temper and quietly replied:

"Now do not be hasty about this matter. Old Davy Crockett's motto was a mighty good one, you know; 'besure you are right, then go ahead!' It would not be a bad idea for you to act on that in this case."

"That I have met Miss Catalina on three or four occasions in the foot-hills is true, but those meetings were purely accidental; I was going about my business and the young lady about hers, and I do not believe we ever conversed together ten minutes on any of these occasions; so if anybody has told you that there is any love affair between the girl and myself, or that I have thrown myself in her way with the idea of gaining her affection, the party is a liar, pure and simple. I speak plainly so that you will not have any doubt in regard to my words."

Gomes gave a sniff of contempt and the expression irritated Blake so much that it was with difficulty he refrained from taking the Cuban by the throat.

He choked back his anger though and said:

"I judge that you do not believe me?"

"Because I know that it is not so!"

"You know it?"

"Yes!"

"I should like to know how you know it."

"I had a conversation with Catalina this morning."

"You don't mean to say that the girl told you that there was any love affair between us?" Blake cried.

"Oh, no; she became indignant when I spoke of the matter and stalked away with the air of a princess."

"No wonder. I suppose she was as astonished at the accusation as myself," Blake remarked.

"But I say, why are you troubling yourself about this matter—what business is it of yours whether the girl falls in love with me or not?"

"Do you not think it is the business of any honest man to prevent a young and innocent girl from becoming the prey of a rascally gambler such as you are?" Gomes exclaimed, indignantly, and he reached for his revolver as he spoke.

Blake saw that the time for action had come, and, with a tiger-like spring, he jumped for the Cuban just as the latter got his pistol out.

Down upon his back went Gomes, Blake adding his own weight to insure the force of the fall.

The concussion with the hard ground sent the revolver flying from the grasp of the Cuban, and Blake, quickly assuming a position astride of him, twisted his hand in the scarf which encircled the neck of Gomes, and brought his knuckles to bear against the throat in such a way that he could strangle the prostrate man.

As soon as he recovered from the shock of the fall, the Cuban began to struggle desperately, but Blake held him firmly pinned to the ground, and pressing the iron-like knuckles, soon had him choked almost into insensibility.

When Gomes ceased to struggle, the Fresh removed the pressure from his throat.

"I want you to understand, my friend, that I have got you into a mighty tight place!" Blake exclaimed.

"If you will keep quiet we will talk this matter over, and see if we cannot come to an understanding, but if you are inclined to be ugly, I shall have to choke you until you get over it."

It will be seen that the Fresh of 'Frisco was master of the situation.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FRESH TALKS SENSE.

IN wild, impotent rage the Cuban glared at his conqueror, and, as soon as he recovered his breath, exclaimed:

"You miserable desperado! you do not dare to give me an opportunity to meet you in a fair and open fight!"

"My friend, I think you are inclined to be decidedly unreasonable," Blake remarked. "You began this war by attempting to pull your gun upon me; apparently you were satisfied that the conditions were all right, or else you would not have commenced the fight. Now, among the men who know me, and excellent judges they are in a matter of this kind, I am reckoned to be as quick a man on the draw as there is in the West, and if I had chosen to go for my gun, the odds are big that I would have got first fire and laid you out in good style, but, if I am a miserable desperado, I am not hankering after your blood, and so I chose to put you on your back, in such a position that you will be obliged to listen while I try to instill some sense into your thick head!"

"You scoundrel! do you dare to insult me?" Gomes cried, and he made another attempt to rise, but the sport again pressed his iron-like knuckles into the Cuban's throat. "None of that, you know, or I'll choke the life out of you!" Blake warned.

"It is not of the least use for you to be ugly about this matter. I have got you in a tight place, and the sooner you realize the fact the better."

"Now I am going to talk sense to you, and

you have got to hear it, for you cannot help yourself."

"Do not dare to insult me then, for you can rest assured I will call you to a bloody account!" Gomes declared.

"Just you keep a guard on your own tongue," Blake retorted. "I do not relish being called names any more than you do. And as to calling me to an account I reckon you will always be able to find me without any trouble. But I would make this suggestion. If you really hanker after a shooting-match with me, don't select for the place of the encounter a wild, solitary spot like this."

"I know that within the limits of civilization men, when they want to fight duels, are obliged to sneak away and find some solitary spot for the picnic, but then they are always careful to have witnesses to the fight, so that the world will understand that the contest was a fair one; but in a wild region there is no objection to two men settling a dispute right in the main street of any mining camp, and they are always sure of plenty of witnesses. But if we fought here, the victor would be liable to the suspicion of having committed murder. If you should kill me how could any one tell that you had not lain in ambush and taken my life without giving me any chance to protect myself?"

"No one that knows me would dare to bring such an accusation against me!"

"Maybe not, and there lies the advantage of having a good character," Blake observed. "But if I should happen to lay you out, I have a notion that there would be plenty of men in this camp of Slide Out who would be quick to declare that I had assassinated you, and I don't intend to give these enemies of mine a chance to make a point at my expense, and that is one reason why I did not try to draw my gun."

"I have an idea, you know, that this is all a put up job to get me in a hole."

"The supposition is absurd!" the Cuban declared. "I am no man's tool!"

"Oh, I do not suppose that you mean to be; I fancy that some one has been playing a sharp game, and is using you as an instrument without your knowledge."

"No, no, you are wrong!" Gomes declared, stubbornly.

"No doubt you believe that, but it is my opinion that you are not up to the game which is being played. You are not the first man who has been hoodwinked and made to pull somebody else's chestnuts out of the fire without being conscious of the fact."

"Of course, I admit there is a chance that I have been deceived, but I do not think so," the superintendent replied.

"Well, I know that you are barking up the wrong tree," the sport declared. "But I cannot tell whether you blundered of your own accord or whether some one has set you on."

"I fancy from what you have said that you are in love with Miss Catalina."

"I fairly adore the ground she walks upon!" Gomes declared, with true Spanish impulsive ness.

"You have got it pretty bad, I see," Blake remarked, dryly. "And you are angry with me because you think I have supplanted you in the girl's affections?"

"Yes, that is true, and I will not be satisfied until we have met in mortal combat. It is either your life or mine; this world is not big enough to hold both of us!" Gomes cried, fiercely.

"I will be hanged if you are not a regular fire-eater," Blake remarked, in an extremely sarcastic way.

"But I cannot say that I agree with you about this matter. To my thinking, this world is a mighty big one, and there is lots of room in it for lots of men. But, apart from this girl affair, you have no cause for hatred toward me!"

"No, except that I despise all gamblers and men who live by their wits."

"But you do not hold yourself bound to kill all the men of that kind whom you may happen to encounter?" the sport remarked, with a contemptuous smile.

"Oh, no."

"Because, if you did, I should have to rise to remark that the odds are big that you had bitten off more than you could chew. But, to return to our mutton. You are all in the wrong in regard to this affair. I am not in love with the girl, and I reckon she is not in love with me; at all events, I have never seen any signs to lead me to suppose anything of the kind."

"I saved her life—naturally she is grateful; she would be a very strange young woman if she was not; and when we chanced to meet, if we had not stopped to exchange a few words, it would have been remarkably odd, to my thinking. But I am not after the young lady; I am not a marrying man, and have never paid her any attentions. Ask her frankly, or I will do it in your presence, and if she says that I have endeavored in any way to gain her affection, then I will give you leave to make a target of me, and I will not try to defend myself in any way."

"Your offer seems to be a fair one," the superintendent remarked, after turning the matter over in his mind for a moment.

"Fair! well, I should smile!" Blake declared. "I reckon no fairer one was ever made. You can depend upon the girl to tell the truth, and I feel sure she will speak when she learns how things are."

"Oh, yes, no doubt she will tell the truth."

"And if she says I have not made love to her you will believe it?"

"Certainly."

"Now I want you to understand, my bold superintendent, I am not working the game in this way because I am at all afraid of you," the Fresh remarked in his cool and easy way. "But I am satisfied, as I said before, that this is all a carefully contrived plan to get me into trouble, and the Marquis de Belleville is the man who is at the bottom of it."

Blake had his keen eyes fixed intently on Gomes's face as he spoke and the accusation came upon the Cuban so unexpectedly that his features betrayed him.

"Aha! I see I have hit upon the truth!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"I did not say so!" Gomes declared in a dogged way.

"No, but I reckon you do not care to say that it is not so," Blake replied, shrewdly. "I take you to be an honest man, although decidedly hot-headed and impulsive, and I feel sure that you will not lie about the matter even to screen the Marquis de Belleville!"

"I would not lie to screen any man!" the superintendent declared, loftily.

"That is exactly the opinion that I had formed regarding you. Now then, my idea is that the Marquis de Belleville is at the bottom of this matter. He it is that has set you on to attack me. I understand that he wants to get me out of the camp, and doesn't know exactly how to do it, so he arranged this cunning scheme."

"You are madly in love with Miss Catalina, and I jump to the conclusion that the young lady does not look with favor upon your suit."

The glowing expression upon the face of the Cuban showed the quick-witted sport that he had hit upon the truth.

"The marquis knows this of course," Blake continued. "And he thought out the shrewd idea of laying the blame upon me, thereby hoping to provoke you to an attack. You were donkey enough to tumble into the snare—you will have to excuse my plain speaking, but to my thinking the situation demands it," the sharp added, as he noticed that the superintendent did not relish his remarks.

"You know I am speaking the truth about the marquis," Blake went on. "He it was that prompted you to attack me. I am just as certain of it as if I had been present when the scheme was arranged; and, my dear friend Gomes, De Belleville urged you to go for me up in this wilderness so that if I laid you out he would be able to bring an accusation of murder against me."

The Cuban looked perplexed; there was a deal of sense in the words of the sport, and yet he could not bring himself to believe that the marquis would coolly sacrifice him in such a manner.

"You don't know what to make of it, hey?" Blake exclaimed, easily reading the Cuban's thoughts by the expression upon his face. "Well, I don't wonder at it, and I don't wonder that you hesitate to believe that the marquis could coolly and deliberately get you into this thing with the expectation that you would be killed and so give him a chance to get at me. 'Tis not pleasant for a man to think his confidence has been abused in such an atrocious way, but it is a sure enough fact all the same."

"I would prefer to think, if I have been deceived, that any adviser I may have had was also deceived," Gomes remarked slowly.

"Well, that is rather a consoling way to look at it," Blake rejoined. "But you can bet your bottom dollar that if the Marquis de Belleville was your adviser, he was not deceived. But now that you have received this warning from me, perhaps you will be able to discover the truth."

"Understand now if you think you have been wronged by me I am ready to give you satisfaction, but if there is going to be a fight between us let it take place in the camp, where there will be plenty of witnesses, and then the man who comes out first best will not be likely to be accused of being a murderer."

"You are right; I did not think of that," Gomes observed. "It shall be as you say. I will question Catalina. If your statement is true, I have no quarrel with you; but if you have taken the girl away from me, then, as I said before, this world is not big enough for both of us."

"All right; I shall be ready for you," and then Blake rose and permitted the superintendent to get up.

I will see Catalina as soon as I return to the camp and if I am not satisfied I will send you a regular challenge in due form," the Cuban remarked.

"That is the proper way to do business," Blake replied.

Then with a ceremonious bow the Cuban started down the trail at a good pace, the sport following leisurely in his footsteps.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CATALINA SPEAKS.

THE marquis was astounded when he perceived Gomes striding down the trail, while a short distance behind him came the sport.

He had been on the watch with Bristol Bill and three of the police to whom he had confided the intelligence that the superintendent had gone to demand an explanation from the sport and he feared there would be an encounter between them.

"Wa-al, I reckon they didn't have no fight arter all," Bristol Bill remarked.

"So it appears," De Belleville replied with a frown. "I don't understand it, for Gomes was hot for war when he departed, and the sport is not a man to allow himself to be bullied."

"Right you are!" the chief of police declared. "A more sassy cuss, and one quicker on the fight, I never struck since I was hatched, and I have run across a big heap of good men in my time."

The party were inside the shanty which served as the Police Headquarters, the window of which commanded a view of the trail.

The idea of De Belleville in taking refuge inside the shanty was so that Blake would not be alarmed by seeing a party apparently on the watch for him.

The carefully prepared plot had evidently failed, and with rage burning in his heart the marquis waited impatiently for the arrival of the superintendent so that he could learn the particulars.

The Cuban saw the face of the marquis framed in the window, and came directly to the shanty.

"Well, you did not have any trouble with the fellow after all!" the marquis exclaimed.

"Nothing to speak of," Gomes replied, rather evasively. "We had a few hot words, but Blake declares that I am on the wrong track, and refers me to the party in question for proof of his assertion."

"It may be that we have made a mistake, but appearances certainly would lead almost any one to believe as we did," the marquis remarked, in his smooth way. The suspicion had immediately flashed upon him that the sport had been shrewd enough to detect the trap which had been set for him, and had not found it a difficult matter to guess who had planned the snare.

"Did you talk fight to the galoot and he wouldn't take it up?" Bristol Bill exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Well, no, I cannot say that such was the case," Gomes replied, a trifle embarrassed. "He is ready to give me satisfaction at any time if I do not find things to be as he represented."

"That is like the man," the chief observed. "From what I have seen of him I reckon that any cuss w'ot is hankering arter satisfaction from a galoot about his size never need to wait long for it."

Blake at this moment passed by, and the eyes of all within the shanty were fixed upon him.

The sport went on, apparently taking no notice of the men in the house, but they did not escape his quick eye though.

And after passing he framed his thoughts into words.

"The marquis and his gang were in there all ready to pounce upon me if I had laid the Cuban out," he murmured.

"Gomes is an ass—there is no doubt about that, or he never would have been so easily fooled by the marquis, but that is no reason why I should kill him though; but if Catalina fails to satisfy him, and he comes after me in the town, why, I will be obliged to lay him out in self-defense."

The sport went on down the trail, and after a few more words of no particular import the marquis and superintendent left the shanty.

Freed from the presence of the others the pair could talk freely, and Gomes related the particulars of his interview with Blake; he did not think it necessary though to speak of the struggle which he had had with the sport, or describe the peculiar position which he occupied during the conversation.

"It is absurd, the idea that I set you on!" the marquis declared. "I spoke of the matter because I thought it was my duty to do so; the friendship which I have for you urged me on. I have no particular liking for this rascal, of course, yet he is not of consequence enough for me to bother myself much about him. I think the camp would be the better of his absence, but as long as he behaves himself I shall not trouble him."

"Naturally the fellow is inclined to think he is a much bigger man than he really is."

"It may be true that he has not sought to engage the affections of Catalina, but I feel assured that whether it has been his game to make the girl fall in love with him or not, the fact remains that she takes a much deeper interest in the rascal than I like to see; and it is my firm impression that if he had not made his appearance in this camp you would have had no difficulty in marrying Catalina."

Gomes's dark face became darker still as he

meditated over the matter for a few minutes before replying; then he said:

"It is possible that the girl has given this adventurer her love unsought; it is sometimes the case in this world; women pass by honest men and give themselves to fellows who are wholly unworthy. In such a case, although a man might feel like killing the rascal, yet he is hardly justified in so doing."

"Well, that is a point that every man must settle for himself," the marquis observed in his smooth way. "As far as I am concerned, if I thought by removing the man I would be able to win the girl, I think I should most certainly pick a quarrel with him."

"I must see what Catalina says before I can make up my mind in regard to that," Gomes answered, gloomily.

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly," the marquis remarked, satisfied with having thrown out the dark hint which he felt sure the Cuban would be certain to brood over.

Gomes sought Catalina at once, and although he was received in a chilling manner, for the girl resented the style in which he had spoken to her, yet the superintendent, in a dogged way, explained why he had come.

"It is utterly ridiculous!" Catalina cried, her face scarlet. "Mr. Blake has never paid me the least attention. When we have chanced to meet we have exchanged a few words together, but the man is certainly not in love with me, although I may be with him!" she added with bitter scorn. "And if I was in love with him," she continued, "I would not hesitate for a moment in becoming his wife, for to my thinking he is as perfect a gentleman as I have ever met!"

"If that is your opinion I shall not attempt to alter it," the superintendent remarked with great dignity, and then he took his departure, almost bursting with rage.

But in spite of his anger he could not bring himself to attack Blake, for as he uttered a dozen times: "The man is not to blame!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TREASURE TRAIN.

ANOTHER ten days went by, nothing of any interest affecting the characters of our tale occurred.

The day came on which the treasure train was to depart.

It was called the treasure train, although it only consisted of one wagon, wherein the precious metals were placed, and a guard of ten men under the command of Bristol Bill.

It was the largest amount of money that had ever left the valley at one time.

There was a little over twenty thousand dollars in the wagon, although the marquis had taken particular care to lead every one to believe that the output of the mine had not been over five thousand.

De Belleville had strained every nerve to get out as much money as possible, for upon this sum he depended to pay the debts he had incurred, and when they were once paid, he could feel as if he was on his feet again.

"If they get through all right we will run nicely hereafter," the marquis remarked to Isabel, as they watched the train depart.

"Do you think there is any danger that the train will not get through?" she inquired, anxiously, for as well as the marquis she knew how important it was that the precious cargo should reach the hands of their creditors.

"Oh, no, I only spoke at random," De Belleville answered. "The only band of outlaws that there are anywhere in this section are the Gray Cats of San Pedro, and they got so well whipped the last time they attempted to meddle with our treasure train that they will not be likely to attempt the game again in a hurry."

"It would be almost ruin to us if the train was captured," Isabel observed, thoughtfully.

"Yes, for our creditors are getting impatient, and if this money failed to reach them, there is no doubt that some of them would be apt to be ugly, and try to push us to the wall."

"We shall be easy though when this money is paid."

"Yes, we can breathe again."

This conversation showed how vital the safe arrival of the treasure train was to the scheming pair.

On its way, down the narrow trail through the rugged foot-hills, went the train.

Bristol Bill was in advance; four men rode in his rear, then came the wagon containing the bags filled with the precious stuff, and five more armed men rode in the rear of the wagon.

Four mules drew the vehicle, guided by a gaunt, long-bearded driver, Long John by name.

Almost half the distance to the Rio San Pedro the train covered, and then they halted for a nooning.

It was a wild bit of country—a little valley through which ran the trail alongside of a crystal stream which flowed down from the mountains.

The halt had just been made, and the men were gathered in a group by the wagon, when,

with demon-like yells, the party were suddenly charged by a foe who had been lying in ambush.

To the minds of the astonished escort there seemed to be about fifty of the assailants; the trees, bushes and rocks seemed to be alive with them.

Sharply the revolver-shots rung out on the air, and the new-comers charged the escort with a recklessness which spread a panic amid them.

The attackers came from the southwest, and drove the Slide Out men up the trail in the direction from which they came.

At the first of the surprise Long John had sprung from the wagon and taken refuge in flight.

The attackers were all on foot, and each and every man wore a black mask, completely concealing his features.

The moment Long John abandoned his seat one of the disguised men sprung into it, seized the reins and the big whip, which the driver had dropped in his fright, and shouted to the mules.

The escort, in their panic, had been driven some fifty feet up the trail, but when they saw the treasure wagon being driven away by the attackers they rallied, Bristol Bill yelling at the top of his voice, bidding them stand their ground.

"They have got the dust, boys, and we must take it from them!" the chief of police cried.

Inspired by the words and example of their leader, the Slide Out men dashed forward, but were received by a volley from the masked men which sent fully two-thirds the party rolling in the dust.

The attackers evidently were striving to damage the horses more than the men.

Being thus rudely received, the Slide Out men again broke and retreated in confusion.

Bristol Bill was not on hand to rally them this time, for his horse had been shot, and falling on his knees, had sent the chief of police flying over his head.

Bristol Bill was partially stunned by the fall, so it was fully five minutes before he gained his feet.

The masked men did not attempt to follow up their advantage, but retreated after the treasure wagon, which was being driven away at the best speed of which the mules were capable, the captors running after it, but ever and anon casting glances behind them in order to see whether the Slide Out men had any idea of pursuing.

The moment Bristol Bill pulled himself together and got on his feet, he commenced to yell to his men to rally and pursue the robbers.

The voice of Bill though had lost its charm; the Slide Out men had suffered too severely to be able to pursue the victors.

There were only five out of the ten who were in condition to do any fighting, and not an unwounded horse was there.

"Durn it all, boys, are you going to let the galoots git away with the plunder?" the chief of police yelled.

By this time the wagon had disappeared around a bend in the trail.

"W'ot is the use o' talkin'?" cried one of the men, in a disgusted way. "We can't do anything. We are a badly-whipped crowd and no mistake."

And as Bristol Bill looked upon his face he saw how true was the assertion.

Although no man had been killed outright, or even mortally wounded—this was owing to the fact that the assailants had directed their fire at the horses—yet the majority of the party were so bruised and battered by the falls which they had got, when so unceremoniously tumbled from their steeds, that they were in no condition for war.

They were a completely demoralized gang and in no condition to give pursuit to a victorious foe.

Bristol Bill perceived this and so reluctantly he gave the order to return to the camp.

Great was the surprise in Slide Out when the escort returned, minus the treasure wagon, and told the story of how it had been wrested from them.

All was bustle and confusion, the marquis raged like a madman, and immediately proceeded to raise a force to go in search of the outlaws.

That the capture of the treasure was due to a carefully-arranged plan was evident.

Owing to the speed with which the robbery had been effected none of the party were able to give any particular description of the robbers.

They were not the Gray Cats of San Pedro, that was evident, for they did not wear the odd, skin masks which those outlaws affected.

They were a band of roughly-dressed, determined, desperate men, fully armed, and acting with military precision, and that was all that any of the defeated party could say.

Isabel Escobedo believed she could solve the mystery, and woman-like, without reason, declared to the marquis, when he came to the house to prepare for the expedition, that the sport, Blake, was the man who had organized the raid.

The marquis was astonished for a moment, then he reflected upon the matter, shook his head, and said:

"If this Blake is the man you take him to be, I do not doubt that he would like to deal us such a blow, although it is not possible that he could know how vital to our interests is the possession of the money just now, but the conditions of the robbery are such that I do not see how it is possible that he could have arranged the attack."

"According to the account given by the men there were twelve or fifteen in the attacking party, and where would this Blake raise such a force?"

"Oh, I cannot explain that, of course!" Isabel exclaimed, despairingly. "All that I can say is that I feel the blow comes from this man. He has come to hunt me down—he seeks vengeance, and this stealing of our treasure, which will be likely to force us to give up the mine, is due to him and him alone."

De Belleville was not convinced, although he admitted that there might be something in the suspicion.

"I will send to his mine and ask him and his partner to volunteer to aid us to pursue the robbers," he said. "If he is absent, it will look as if he did have a hand in the matter."

"But there has been plenty of time for him to return, even if he took part in the robbery," Isabel urged.

"True, but he would be hardly likely to hurry back, for he would not think he would be suspected."

"The man is a devil, and has brains enough to think of everything," the woman exclaimed, despairingly.

The marquis immediately dispatched a messenger to Blake's claim, and within twenty minutes the man was back, bearing word that Blake and his partner would be glad to join the force, and would be on the ground as soon as they could arm themselves.

"You see, your surmise was wrong," De Belleville remarked to his wife.

"No; I am correct in my suspicion, but the man is more cunning than you give him credit for being," she declared.

Twenty minutes later the party started.

There were over forty men, all told. Blake and his partner came promptly, and Bristol Bill, in the advance, led the expedition to the scene of the robbery.

"Mighty little use of all this trouble," he growled to one of his confidants. "The cusses have got a good six hours' start, and we might as well look for a needle in a bundle of hay as expect to track birds like these galoots through the foot-hills."

"The boss believes we can track the wagon, though," the other remarked.

"Well, I reckon there is something in that," the chief of police admitted.

De Belleville was correct in his belief, for it was an easy matter to track the wagon, and they came upon the vehicle a short half-mile from the spot where the fight had taken place.

The mules were tied to a tree so that they could not wander away.

All in the expedition gave a great shout when they saw the wagon, and hurried onward with increased speed, many of the party getting out their weapons in readiness for a fight.

But the wiser men did not trouble themselves to prepare for war; they did not anticipate that the robbers were in the neighborhood. They guessed that the wagon had been abandoned after being robbed of its precious contents.

This was correct, as was discovered after searching the vehicle.

The wagon was empty, but in the bottom of it was a sheet of paper with a stone upon it so that it would not blow away.

Rudely scrawled upon the paper with a lead-pencil was this message, which the marquis read aloud for the edification of the rest:

"Notis

To them galoots wot may be consarned. We air a band of brother—ten good men—we hev devided the dust and dusted. Ketch us if ye kin, solong!"

The men of Slide Out looked at each other, and then nearly every man in the party shook his head.

The opinion was general that the robbers had played a mighty sharp game, and that it would be about as easy to follow a pack of hunted wolves through the trackless wilds as to give chase to the robbers.

"I reckon these hyer cusses are going to be too much for us," Bristol Bill observed. "They are up to snuff, and no mistake. The dodge they have played is a mighty cute one. Arter making sich a haul they reckoned that if they kept together they might be followed, so they divided the plunder and each man went off on his own hook; so that to git back the hull of the dust, all ten of the men would have to be captured, and the odds are big that a job like that cannot be worked. If we got one galoot we would only get one-tenth of the plunder."

"But if these men were on foot, we, on horseback, ought to be able to capture some of them," the marquis added.

"They were on foot when they ambushed us, but you kin bet all yer wealth that thar hosses wasn't far off!" the chief of police asserted.

Then one of the party suggested that an ex-

amination be made so as to ascertain whether this was true or not.

Search was made, and the spot where a number of horses had been corraled was soon found.

Although it was the opinion of the majority of the party that it would be only a waste of time to attempt to track the outlaws, yet the attempt was made.

The trail was followed clear to the valley of the Rio San Pedro, and there, in the well-traveled road, totally lost.

"Might as well chase the birds in the air!" Bristol Bill declared.

Utterly discouraged, the marquis gave up the chase, and the party made their way back to Slide Out.

Isabel was anxiously awaiting the marquis's return.

"No chance of recovering the money," De Belleville exclaimed as soon as they were alone together.

"Can we hold on to the mine?"

"No; the property is mortgaged for all it is worth, the interest overdue, and the chances are that we will have to give it up."

"It is this man Blake, and you must kill him!" Isabel said.

"That is easier said than done," the marquis replied.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CRASH COMES.

It was as the marquis anticipated; the creditors were not willing to wait any longer for their money and as soon as they found that De Belleville could not possibly meet his obligations they sent agents to the camp to see what arrangement could be made.

Examination showed that the marquis was hopelessly bankrupt; the colossal fortune which he was supposed to possess had taken unto itself wings and vanished; the only thing that the creditors could do was to take possession of the property.

The agents were not at all satisfied with the way the business had been conducted. De Belleville had lived in an extravagant manner, and the books were so badly mixed that it appeared to them, notwithstanding the marquis's assertion that he was totally ruined, that he had contrived to secure considerable money.

The agents were plain, straight-forward business men and they made no bones of telling the marquis what they thought.

He professed to be extremely indignant—cried out that he was an honorable man and that after he had given up all his property into the hands of his creditors he thought it was an outrage to suggest he had been guilty of any wrongdoing.

The agent's accusations were extremely galling to De Belleville for he expected to be put in as manager of the property for the creditors at a good, big salary, but now he saw there was no chance for this and that he must leave the camp.

One of the agents was inclined to be ugly and hinted to the marquis that if he did not give up the money he had secreted he might be hauled up before a court.

At this threat the marquis laughed, snapped his finger in defiance and bade the lawyer do his worst.

Since he had nothing to expect from the agents he threw off the mask.

Gomes was made manager of the works, and De Belleville announced his intention of departing for his wife's estates in Mexico. He spoke grandiloquently of the fine ranch which she possessed there, and endeavored to carry his head fully as high as when he had been the master of the town.

Then all of a sudden Isabel fell sick; it was no wonder, people thought, after all the worry and excitement through which she had passed.

The only medical man in the camp was Major Pete Houston, who, in his younger days had been a doctor, and though it had been years since he had practiced, yet in urgent cases he did what he could.

The genial proprietor then of the State of Texas Saloon was called upon to attend Madam de Belleville.

After an examination he gave his opinion that she was suffering from a low fever and that a little quinine and whisky would be as good as anything.

As quinine and whisky were the only medicine to be had in the camp, the major was in the habit of prescribing them for almost every case where he was called in.

The medicine did not seem to do any good, and day by day Isabel grew weaker.

She had lost all her old-time energy and had become a nervous, fretful invalid.

The marquis attended to her with a careful tenderness which had a tendency to soften even the hard hearts of the lawyers, who had as good as told him that they considered him a fraud of the first water.

After three weeks of this strange sickness, Isabel was but the shadow of her former self, and Major Pete declared it was his belief that it was the climate, and recommended a change of air.

"The air of this mountain region is too

harsh," he said. "Take her down south to the plains, and there she may get better."

Major Pete was playing the old game of the "medicine man" who, when he finds that he is utterly unable to do anything for a patient, sends them off to die somewhere else.

But Isabel declared that she was not strong enough to bear the journey, and this was also the opinion of the marquis, who did not seem to lose hope, all the time declaring that it was his belief Isabel's malady would take a turn soon and she would recover, an opinion which few others in the town held, for it was commonly thought that death had set its seal upon the brow of Isabel Escobedo, and that she would soon be at rest beneath the sod.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FACE TO FACE AT LAST.

It was night and the sick woman lay upon a couch of buffalo-robes which had been arranged for her in the sitting-room.

She was fully dressed, for despite her weakness she would not take to her bed, and De Belleville sat by her side.

"It seems to me that you are a little better to-day," he remarked. "Somewhat stronger, at all events."

"Oh, no, I am failing day by day," she replied. "I can feel it and know the reason. I am doomed."

A look of amazement was on the face of the marquis.

"Oh, no, you must not give way to such fancies; how can it be possible that you can know the reason for this strange illness which baffles the skill of Major Houston, who is really an able doctor, although he does not profess to be?"

"It is this man Blake. I am being hounded to my death!" the sick woman declared.

"Oh, that is mere imagination!"

"It is the truth!"

"Oh, no."

"I am being worried into my grave by him—murdered by inches, just as surely as though he was giving me slow poison."

Despite the firm nerves of De Belleville he could not repress a slight shiver as he listened to the fevered words.

"Calm yourself, Isabel, you must not give way to such thoughts!" he declared.

"I want to see this man!" she exclaimed, abruptly. "I feel that I have not many hours of life left. Send for him—let him confront me face to face so that he may have an opportunity to gloat over the ruin which he has wrought."

"Oh, no, such a thing is not to be thought of!" the marquis declared.

"I will have it so!" she exclaimed, impetuously. "I will not be satisfied to die until I have a chance to speak to this man."

"Do not persist in this mad wish; if you yield to such excitement it will surely do you harm. If you can only continue to hold your own for a few days your cousin, Doctor Escobedo, will be here. It was a most unlucky chance that he should happen to be absent when this attack occurred."

"It was the hand of fate!" Isabel exclaimed. "I have been a bold, unscrupulous, wicked woman—I have gone on, bent on securing the success of my schemes without regard to those who stood in my way, but I have been terribly punished though."

"Let those who believe that there is no justice in this world take warning by my fate."

"Oh, the misery I have undergone and it has all been brought upon me by the pursuit of this demon, the Fresh of Frisco."

"To escape his vengeance I took refuge in the madhouse, and what I suffered there I will never forget; I never close my eyes to seek rest in sleep but the heart-rending cries of the unfortunate lunatics are ringing in my ears. Oh, it is terrible."

"You must calm yourself; by giving way to such excitement as this you do yourself great injury."

"Send for this Blake then; I will not be satisfied until I see him."

The marquis saw that she was determined and so a messenger was dispatched to summon the sport.

"He may fear that there is some trap in this message and decline to come," De Belleville suggested.

"Oh, no, he will come!" Isabel declared.

"He will not be able to resist the opportunity to see the woman he hates in mortal pain."

She was right.

Within half an hour Blake entered the apartment.

"I am much obliged to you for coming at my request," she said, after the sport had accepted the chair proffered by the marquis.

Blake bowed.

Maurice, will you have the kindness to leave me alone with this gentleman for a few moments? When I want you I will touch the bell."

"Certainly, but be careful and do not excite yourself, Isabel."

"Oh, yes, I will be careful," she replied with bitter accent.

The marquis withdrew.

The man and woman gazed at each other silently for a few moments, then Isabel spoke:

"Well, do you find that I am much changed?"

"Yes, it is evident that you are an extremely sick woman."

"I sent for you that you might have an opportunity to see how successful you have been in your scheme of vengeance; you have hunted me down to the grave!"

Then perceiving that he was about to speak she stopped him with an impetuous move of her hand.

"Don't speak—hear me out with patience, please! I judge from your face that you are about to deny the truth," she continued. "Of what avail will it be for you to deny? I know that it is the truth and you know it. We are here alone together, let us then be frank with each other."

"I am not long for this world. I am conscious that my span of life is measured by hours rather than by days—it may be by minutes only."

"I have been a wicked woman; I acknowledge the truth and shall not try to gloss over my actions in the least."

"In all my life there has been only one love, and that was for my brother, Manuel; you killed him and I swore by everything I held sacred in this world to have a most bloody vengeance for the deed."

"You won Margaret, the heiress of Escobedo and carried her away to an Eastern home; I followed you thirsting for vengeance."

"And you succeeded in obtaining it; you murdered by poison the fairest, sweetest woman that ever graced this earth!" Blake exclaimed in a tone of deep feeling.

"Did I not have the death of Manuel to avenge?" she exclaimed.

"But Margaret Escobedo had never wronged either you or your brother?"

"That is true—I admit it, but the blow, although it fell on her, was aimed at you. Did it not cause your heart to bleed? Would you not rather have given your own life than have her suffer?"

"Yes, a thousand times, yes!" the Fresh of Frisco exclaimed, impulsively.

"That was my calculation; you can see that I planned my vengeance with a fiend-like cunning. I only made one mistake; I underrated your skill and cunning. I believed I had concealed my movements so well that you would not be able to discover who had dealt you such a terrible blow—I did not think it possible that you would be able to track me, but you did, and the moment my spies reported that you had arrived in Chihuahua I understood you had come to hunt me down and that it would be a war to the death between us."

"As long as I remained in the Lunatic Asylum I felt I was safe, but as the weary months passed away I saw that I must depart or else become mad myself."

"I fled to France, and believed that at last I had escaped your vengeance, but once more fortune drove me back to America. In this remote corner I thought I would be safe, but again I underrated you, bloodhound that you are!"

"The chase is ended now. I am hunted down, but in the grave I shall find a refuge from your hatred!"

"I am but the instrument of the Supreme Justice which decrees that guilt must be punished," Blake replied.

"But in one of your statements you are wrong. You think that this illness is a natural one brought on by your worry over my pursuit."

"Yes, and it is the truth."

"No, you are the victim of the man who is your husband, and calls himself Maurice, Marquis de Belleville, but who is in reality an escaped French galley-slave—Jean Valvert. You know that your husband is a scoundrel, but you do not know one-half of the crimes which he has committed."

"You are dying of slow poison administered by him. All your money is gone; he can get nothing more from you, and he is anxious for his freedom, so he can marry this girl, Catalina, who is a wealthy heiress, as you well know."

"What proof have you of this?" cried Isabel.

"Very little, but enough to convince me that it is the truth. Michael Barregan was sent away from this camp by the marquis because he was deep in his secrets, and the scoundrel was afraid that Barregan would betray him in some drunken spree."

"On the road Barregan was murdered by his guide, by your husband's order—dead men tell no tales. I witnessed the tragedy, killed the false guide, and heard the confession of the dying Barregan, and he then predicted that you were to be poisoned, so that the marquis could marry Catalina."

"Oh, Heaven! I believe it is the truth, for the marquis has had ample opportunities to do the foul deed. Margaret, Margaret, you are indeed fearfully avenged!"

In her excitement the sick woman sprang to

her feet, beat the air with her hands and then sunk back lifeless.

Into the room with drawn revolver sprung the marquis. He had evidently played the listener.

"Die, you demon!" De Belleville cried.

But the sport was not thus to be trapped. He dropped as the marquis fired, thus dodging the ball, and in another instant discharged his deringer through his coat-pocket without taking the trouble to draw it.

De Belleville staggered and fell, badly, though not mortally wounded, then Blake departed; getting out of the house before any one came to intercept him.

The mission of Fresh the Avenger had at last been accomplished.

Isabel Escobedo was now called to answer at the bar of the last tribunal.

When assistance reached De Belleville he declared that the sport had endeavored to assassinate him, while Blake told the story of the trouble just as it occurred.

De Belleville was no longer all-powerful in the camp of Slide Out, and when the accusation of the marquis was made known to him he openly charged him with having poisoned his wife.

The marquis did not wait for an investigation but took advantage of the night to slink out of the camp.

Blake did not attempt to pursue him.

"Let the scoundrel go!" he cried. "Justice will reach him soon enough."

Our tale is told.

In Slide Out's camp we leave Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco; he tarried for he thought there would be work for him there.

The fair Catalina had some thirty thousand dollars invested in the Red Dragon Mine, and Blake believed that the two lawyers intended to cheat the girl out of it, so he made up his mind that, if such a trick was tried, like a lion in the path of the legal hyenas, would be found the dauntless Frisco Fresh.

THE END.

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